

**A Home at School:
Building Stronger Indigenous People through Cultural Resurgence
in an Urban Ontario Public School Context.**

by
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I conclude by dedicating this project to Aboriginal youth and to educators working in Aboriginal contexts. My hope is that the learnings from the *NYA WEH Program* will guide us as we move forward in Aboriginal education.

Abstract

In this thesis, I work through the educational narratives of young Aboriginal women and men as I explore the relationship between cultural programming and student engagement. My analysis is structured through a collaborative Indigenous research project. My overarching task is to explore how a cultural support program, the *Native Youth Advancement with Education Hamilton (NYA WEH) Program*, offered at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, located in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, attempts to re-imagine Aboriginal education in ways that directly challenge the residential school legacy. In particular, I work to illuminate how particular forms of Aboriginal education are connected to the graduation rates of Aboriginal youth. I argue that the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* navigates Native Studies curriculum, relationships, and notions of culture and tradition are significant to the engagement of Aboriginal youth. This research develops theoretical connections between the contemporary experience of Aboriginal social inequality and educational initiatives which attempt to reverse that legacy. By placing the *NYA WEH Program* narratives side-by-side with literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination, I work to learn how to best support and encourage Aboriginal student engagement in secondary schools across Ontario.

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Prelude: Learning to Unlearn.

Given the historical and ideological context of colonization, can I, a privileged member of dominant society, learn to collaboratively research with Aboriginal communities? Can alliances be built? And perhaps more importantly, should they be built? How best can I move forward with Aboriginal research and education? Drawing from Leela Gandhi (2006), Becky Thompson (2001) and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), I have begun to examine contemporary theoretical conceptualizations of white-supremacist ideology in order to think through and understand my own subjectivity in relation to my research interests.

The politics of positionality are concerned with the multiple, intersecting positions of researcher in relation to research participants. As researchers, we each have the responsibility to interrogate the ways we occupy our various positions. This includes learning how to negotiate and manage our relationships as these are structured through race, class, gender, ability and sexual orientation. Additionally, we have the ethical responsibility to examine our worldview and cultural assumptions (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999).

The process of decolonizing research and activism is an integral component of alliance-building. In her book, entitled *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism*, Becky Thompson (2001) documents ways in which white activists have learned to unlearn dominant ideology. Perhaps through these personal narratives, I may learn how to build alliances across difference so that I will be able to develop necessary and valuable research. I am also learning from Leela Gandhi (2006) who works to promote Derrida's "politic of friendship". In her book, entitled *Affective Communities: Anticolonial thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, Gandhi (2006) explores the history of friendships between colonizer and colonized. She argues the "static notion of identity that

has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism” (p. 3) should shift to provide space to acknowledge “crosscultural collaboration between oppressors and oppressed” (p. 6). Gandhi’s research investigates how women who chose solidarity and cross-cultural friendships worked to “blur the rigid cultural boundaries between West and non-West, colonizer and colonized” (p. 2).

I have spent the past year working as a research assistant at the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research & Education and have had the honour of participating in a multi-cultural collaborative Aboriginal research project. This experience has helped me to learn about cross-cultural relationships and the need for culturally-centered research built on foundations of trust. Ethical Aboriginal research is an evolving process; integral to this process is the building of respectful relationships. There needs to be Aboriginal community participation in every step of the research journey. Shaping the research process and challenging prevailing understandings of knowledge production, relationships with community are a critical component of Aboriginal Self-determination.

I have come to learn, as well, that there is a spiritual component to research which is perhaps not even recognized let alone appreciated in Western research methods. As critical researchers, we need to ensure that the work we do serves the needs of Aboriginal communities; needs which include honouring spirituality and respecting traditional knowledges. It is not until we open our minds to accepting that we are entering Aboriginal communities as participants in a process of co-constructing knowledges that we truly begin to open ourselves to the process of learning to unlearn. We need to slow down, reflect, and be invited into these sacred spaces.

Introduction:

A Home at School- Building Stronger Indigenous People

*“Six in ten Aboriginal students quit school before Grade 12-
A shocking failure rate in the Canadian education system.”¹*

Learning from shared narratives.

A successful school culture is a place where all students feel welcome, see themselves in the curriculum and are taught in ways that reflect their own particular learning styles and epistemological orientations. Scholars and educators concerned to support Aboriginal² youth, however, have begun to critique and problematize the Ontario public education system in an attempt to illuminate the structural barriers experienced by those outside “the mainstream” (see for example, Battiste, 2000, 2005; Battiste and Barman, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995, 2000; Kirkness, 1998). They argue that Aboriginal students are often excluded by aspects of the curriculum in Ontario’s public school system. As a result, they

¹(Henchey, 2005).

²Although I use the term ‘Aboriginal’ throughout this paper to refer to the Original Peoples of Turtle Island, I do so self-consciously. Introduced by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, ‘Aboriginal’ is the common, generic term used in Canada to include First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons, both status and non-status living in the nation-state now called Canada. I am aware, however, of two shifts in regard to self-identification as expressed through International Indigenous Social Movements. It is argued that the term ‘Aboriginal’ should be replaced by ‘Indigenous’, a term which is used internationally to identify Original Peoples of various lands. This shift would work to build global alliances and solidarity amongst Original Peoples. Another shift underway amongst some Original Peoples in Canada, in resistance to the use of the term ‘Aboriginal’, is a move to more tribally specific language. In recognition of and in resistance to a Pan-Aboriginal homogenization, various members of communities choose to self-identify as members of a specific cultural/tribal heritage. For example, Aboriginal Peoples make a distinction between the Haudenosaunee Nations and the Anishinabe Nation. Furthermore, there is discussion too that this shift is also a means of moving away from colonial language to terminology of the Peoples’ own self-identification. As an example, the term Iroquois, which is rooted in the initial contact period, is giving way to the more culturally accurate term Haudenosaunee, which is culturally grounded in the language of the People. Additionally, the term Turtle Island is commonly referred to by numerous Aboriginal Nations across the nation-state now known as Canada. It is used to recall the many variants of Creation Stories that contend that North America rests on the back of a giant turtle.

suggest that publicly funded schools in Ontario must do things differently in order to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal students; needs which reside in the fundamental right to Aboriginal Self-determination³.

Provincial statistics indicate that more than half of Aboriginal youth disengage from publicly funded education in Ontario. Why are young Aboriginal women and men disengaging from high school? What can be done to support the engagement and thus graduation of Aboriginal students in publicly funded schools across the province? Engagement is a complicated concept. Prevailing approaches to Aboriginal education measure levels of 'engagement' through statistics gathered regarding items such as attendance levels, credit accumulation, suspensions and graduation rates. The work of this thesis is to complicate dominant understandings of 'engagement' by suggesting that Aboriginal student engagement must necessarily be linked to concepts such as self-esteem, self-identity and visions of the future. This approach to 'engagement' provides a more holistic understanding of educational experiences. Educators and scholars supporting Aboriginal Self-determination (for example, Alfred, 1999; Battiste, 2000, 2005, 2008; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Brant Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Deloria, 1991a, 1991b; Ermine, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Kirkness, 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Youngblood Henderson, 1993) argue that the educational needs of Aboriginal youth include access to educational programming that supports Indigenous language, culture, identity, spirituality and ways of knowing. This approach to education is identified as necessary for Aboriginal education for Self-determination. I utilize the term Aboriginal education for Self-

³ My use of capitals is purposeful and political. I do so in resistance to the ways in which Aboriginal Peoples have historically been socially constructed as inferior by the prevailing, dominant white settler-society. My choice to capitalize Aboriginal Self-determination as well as Aboriginal education for Self-determination is an extension of those lines of thinking. In addition, I choose to capitalize as a way of speaking back to Canada's devastating historical involvement in the 'education' of Aboriginal Peoples.

determination to group a body of literature on Aboriginal education which has these characteristics: issues of control, knowledge production, curriculum, identity, language and traditions, and Self-determination. My purpose in utilizing the term Aboriginal education for Self-determination is to frame the political landscape of Aboriginal education.

This introduction unfolds as follows. First, I set the theoretical lens of the thesis through a brief discussion of Aboriginal Self-determination. Next, I present the project of the thesis, and then sketch out the central arguments. Fourth, I provide an overview of the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. This research project considers the lived experiences of Aboriginal students and their communities and is grounded in the narratives of participants involved in *Native Youth Advancement with Education Hamilton (NYA WEH) Program*. In this section, I also introduce the research team as I outline the collaborative relationships involved in this research project. Fifth, I provide a map regarding how this thesis will unfold, and then sixth, I conclude the introduction by drawing attention to the purpose and contribution of this thesis project.

Aboriginal Self-determination.

This thesis is approached through a lens which supports Aboriginal Self-determination. I therefore begin my introduction with an overview of how and why Indigenous scholars present claims to Self-determination as a key aspect of re-making education. Aboriginal scholars and activists in Canada argue that the original treaty agreements that were established between First Nations and the British Crown clearly identify that negotiations occurred between sovereign Nations. As Venne (2002) identifies,

“If Indigenous peoples had been subjects of the British Crown, they would not have entered into the treaties” (p. 44). First Nations were never to be subservient to Britain. As Aboriginal scholars indicate, however, with the establishment of Canada as a nation state, these treaties were disregarded. The new Canadian state did not honour the original Treaties that First Nations had with the British Crown (Venne, 2002).

Those arguing for Aboriginal Self-determination clearly articulate the right of Indigenous communities to be autonomous and independent. It is the right of Aboriginal Peoples to be in control of their own lives and communities, including the right to determine what to do with land and resources (see Alfred, 1999). Therefore, Aboriginal communities working toward Self-determination reject cultural assimilation and advocate ending the colonial relationship. Connecting Aboriginal Self-determination with decolonization and healing, Tuhiwai- Smith (1999) writes that Self-determination “becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural, and economic terrains” (p. 116). Discussing nation-to-nation relations with the Canadian state, Alfred (1999) contends that it is imperative for Aboriginal Nations to reject the claims of the Canadian State. As he writes,

A political space must be created for the exercise of self-determination. Native communities must reject the claimed authority of the state, assert their right to govern their own territories and people, and act on that right as much as their capacity to do so allows. (p. 137)

These perspectives are supported by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which, in its statement of principles, identifies in Article 3 that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely

determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”.

Self-determination is about relationships that Peoples have with themselves, each other and their social institutions. In the context of education, Aboriginal Self-determination is about Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education. As Hampton (2000) illustrates, First Nations across Turtle Island have always been committed to Self-determining education. He writes,

In treaty negotiations First Nations agreed to share an immense and rich land with European immigrants. In return, The Crown committed itself to major responsibilities in the areas of health, economic development, and education. With respect to education, the Crown’s responsibility included three key provisions: (1) establishment of schools, (2) equal educational outcomes, and (3) choice. (p. 210)

This third provision ‘choice’ clearly identifies rights to Aboriginal education for Self-determination. As Hampton (2000) further explains, “Choice is by definition a key ingredient in self-determination, and First Nations have made clear from the beginning that they reserve the right to adopt and adapt education on their own terms” (p. 212). When asked what sovereignty means to him, Alfred (1999) responds that sovereignty is necessary for survival, and is an expression of self-determination. He explains,

To me it’s the Mohawk people using our terminology to express our self-determination – how we will exist, how we will relate to each other and to other people. We will make those decisions, and we will make decisions that affect our culture, our language, and how we teach our children. It’s about decision on survival; everything’s based on survival. (p. 110)

In this thesis, I investigate the widely recognized problem of Aboriginal youth dis/engagement. Common approaches to Aboriginal education focus on disengagement. However, in this thesis, I focus on youth engagement with education. As such, I choose to

complicate common understandings of this problem by employing the language of “dis/engagement”. Specifically, I look to explore Aboriginal student engagement with one particular high school in Ontario. In order to guide my understanding of the contemporary reality of Aboriginal education, I locate my understanding of this phenomenon in the literature written by those with anti-colonial, pro self-determination perspectives.

The project of the thesis.

The project of this thesis is to explore the relationship between cultural support services, as exemplified through the *NYA WEH Program*, and the high levels of Aboriginal student engagement at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School (Sir John A. Macdonald), Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). Although a *NYA WEH Program* also exists at Cathedral High School, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic School Board, my study is limited to the *NYA WEH Program* at Sir John A. Macdonald, HWDSB⁴.

My analysis of Aboriginal youth engagement at this publicly funded high school is structured through an Indigenous research project entitled *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. This research project, conducted in the spring of 2009 and of which I was a co-researcher, was a collaborative effort between Sir John A. Macdonald, located in downtown Hamilton, Ontario, Canada and the Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education (the Tecumseh Centre), Brock University, St.Catharines, Ontario, Canada. In this project, we used an Indigenous

⁴ Although this research is not a comparison study, I do note that the *NYA WEH Program* is not the only such undertaking in Canada. Literature on Aboriginal education school programming demonstrates that initiatives supporting Self-determining Aboriginal education are underway across the country (see for example, Battiste & Barman, 1995; Bell, 2004; Brant Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000; Fulford, 2007; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997; LaFrance, 2000; Regnier, 1995; Williams, 2000). This literature is beyond the scope of my thesis, however, I do briefly return to it in the conclusion as an area of future research.

methodological approach, the Wildfire Research Method (Kompf & Hodson, 2000), in order to speak with and learn from community members who participate in the *NYA WEH Program* at Sir John A. Macdonald.

The NYA WEH Program is a cultural support program that was developed in 2003 by Sir John A. Macdonald to support the needs of Aboriginal students at this high school. Of great significance to educators is the exceptionally low early leaving rates of Aboriginal youth at this particular school. While provincial statistics indicate that more than half of Aboriginal youth disengage from high school (Henshey, 2005), at this secondary school, evidence suggests that the early leaving rates of Aboriginal youth are much lower. Important things are happening at this high school. What are these ‘somethings’ that are occurring? Are these ‘somethings’ narratives that wait to be listened to and learned from?

In the following thesis, I work through the educational narratives of young Aboriginal women and men as I explore the relationship between cultural programming and student engagement and attempt to determine what it is at this school, and in this program, that is working to engage Aboriginal students. It is my guiding thought that the educational narratives of those who participate in the *NYA WEH Program* will help scholars and educators understand what it is about this program that is working to support the engagement of Aboriginal youth.

I use literature that calls for Aboriginal education for Self-determination in order to hear, learn from and guide my analysis and understandings of these educational narratives. Although I ground the core of my thesis in the writings of Aboriginal and Indigenous scholars, I do, however, include valuable contributions to the field of Aboriginal education made by non-Aboriginal scholars. Much of the discourse related to Aboriginal education

continues to make a distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators working in the field. In recognition of the involvement of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples who dedicate their lives to Aboriginal Education for Self-determination, I choose to refrain from the use of that distinction. Rather, I adopt the expression ‘educators working in Aboriginal contexts’ to shift focus from the ethnic and cultural heritage of those who are making valuable contributions to the field of Aboriginal education, to the context in which education takes place. I make this shift in order to avoid essentialism while also re-focusing our attention to the environments in which learning takes place. I do also wish to acknowledge, however, that I do hear and honour those who hold that there is an essential difference and that in this context concerns over essentialism may possibly stem from Western ideology. For example, some may argue the need for Aboriginal role models, without discounting the role of non-Aboriginal support.

I engage with this literature on Aboriginal education in order to think through and understand how students, counselors and educators working in Aboriginal contexts understand what is working and what is not working in our publicly funded education system. Furthermore, in the conclusion of this thesis, I bring these educational narratives and the body of literature regarding Aboriginal education for Self-determination into conversation with prevailing policy regarding student dis/engagement. The contribution this thesis makes is its exploration of the particular educational narratives of community members participating in the *NYA WEH Program*. By placing these narratives side-by-side with Aboriginal literature regarding education for Self-determination, I explore how an understanding of lived experiences and a lens of Self-determination can illuminate how best

to support and encourage Aboriginal student engagement in secondary schools across Ontario.

My overarching task is to explore how the *NYA WEH Program* attempts to re-imagine Aboriginal education in ways that directly challenge the residential school legacy. In particular, I work to illuminate how particular forms of Aboriginal education are connected to the graduation rates of Aboriginal youth from secondary schools in Ontario. In 2007 the Ontario Ministry of Education released its policy document entitled the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*⁵. Schools and boards of education across Ontario are mobilizing to respond to its directive to support Aboriginal students. This study will examine if the *NYA WEH Program*, a cultural support program developed four years before this education policy was released, is an example of ‘best practices’ that should be taken up by other schools. Is it a leading example of Aboriginal education for Self-determination? My intent is to examine what is going on at this school to see if there are learnings from the *NYA WEH Program* that would assist other schools in Ontario as they embrace the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007).

The argument of the thesis: Building Stronger Indigenous People.

I have come to understand the *NYA WEH Program* as space within an urban public high school which works to build stronger Indigenous People through creating spiritual spaces where Aboriginal youth are working toward wellness and Self-determination. The

⁵ In its policy document, the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007) the Ontario Ministry of Education identifies Aboriginal education as “one of its key priorities, with a focus on meeting two primary challenges by the year 2016 - to improve achievement among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the areas of literacy, and numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to postsecondary studies” (p. 5).

NYA WEH Program provides an Indigenous physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual space that supports these young women and men as they come to a stronger sense of their own Indigeneity. I will explore the identity-building aspects of the *NYA WEH Program* through the thematic groupings of Native Studies curriculum, relationships, and culture and tradition. I expand on these themes throughout the course of this thesis.

My overall goal in this thesis is to build the argument that as youth learn more about their Indigeneity they begin to feel stronger, see their future, and start to engage with the school system. This engagement with their own lives seems to promote substantially higher rates of high school graduation, which are supported by the *NYA WEH* philosophy of building a “home at school”. The youth tell us that through the *NYA WEH Program* and the cultural teachings provided there, they learn more about their spirituality and they have an increased sense of self-identity. Given the history of Aboriginal education in Canada, what is happening in the *NYA WEH Program* is directly contrary to the most common approaches to the education of Aboriginal youth.

Overview of the research project and the research team.

Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools is an Indigenous research project that studied the *NYA WEH Program* educational narratives. Facilitated by the Tecumseh Centre, this research project employed an Indigenous methodological approach in order to speak with and learn from community members who participate in the *NYA WEH Program*. Early in 2009, the principal of Sir John A. Macdonald contacted Dr. Lorenzo Cherubini, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Brock University, for the purpose of developing a research project regarding the *NYA WEH*

Program. Dr. Cherubini, Principal Investigator for the project, worked with the Tecumseh Centre research team to explore the experiences of the *NYA WEH Program* community. Research team Co-investigators include Dr. John Hodson, Research Officer at the Tecumseh Centre; myself, Jodie Harrison, MA Candidate Social Justice and Equity Studies and Research Assistant at the Tecumseh Centre; and Lyn Trudeau, MEd student and Graphic Artist at the Tecumseh Centre⁶. We worked together as a cross-cultural research team. Dr. Cherubini is of Italian descent; Dr. Hodson is Mohawk, belonging to Turtle Clan; I am of Scottish and Irish descent; Lyn Trudeau is Ojibway, belonging to Eagle Clan and Sarah McGean, who, as a Research Assistant at the Tecumseh Centre joined the research team when we began the Wildfire Gatherings, is Mohawk/Welsh.

Our task was to develop a research design/approach that would explore the *NYA WEH* experiences. By drawing on the diverse narratives of those who make up the *NYA WEH Program* community, we looked to develop a holistic understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal students in one publicly funded secondary school. Specifically, we met with *NYA WEH Program* community members to gather qualitative information regarding the experiences of those who participate in this program. In an effort to develop a holistic understanding, we chose to involve various members of the *NYA WEH* community. Consequently, we met with young women and men, the cultural support workers, teachers, school and community administrators and an Elder in Residence. In total, during the months of May and June 2009, our research team listened to and learned from the shared narratives

⁶ REB file# 08-275. (2009). *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. Brock University.

of twenty-one *NYA WEH* community members in seven separate Wildfire Gatherings⁷.

Figure 1 is a description of the *NYA WEH Program Wildfire Gathering Schedule*.

Figure 1. *The NYA WEH Program Wildfire Gathering Schedule.*

Date	Participant Group
May 4, 2009 a.m.	Two junior women - grades 9 and 10
May 4, 2009 p.m.	Three senior women - grades 11 and 12
May 8, 2009 a.m.	Seven young men - grades 9, 10, 11 and 12
May 19, 2009 a.m.	Three <i>NYA WEH Program</i> cultural support workers
May 19, 2009 p.m.	Two <i>NYA WEH Program</i> teachers
June 1, 2009 a.m.	Two school / community administrators
June 1, 2009 p.m.	One <i>NYA WEH Program</i> Elder in Residence

Throughout the course of the Wildfire Gatherings we elicited participant perceptions of the successes and challenges of the *NYA WEH Program* in order to uncover which interventions are effective and encourage student engagement. This research project culminated in a qualitative content analysis of the educational narratives of these community members. Drawing on their diverse experiences allowed the research team to develop holistic understandings of the *NYA WEH Program* from each of their unique perspectives. Thus, each of the interviewees offered insight into the underlying and contributing factors related to

⁷ A detailed description of the Wildfire Research Method and the Wildfire Gatherings is provided in Chapter 2, p. 75 and p. 77.

‘successful’ Aboriginal education as these rich narratives suggested new theories and practical guidance to educators working in Aboriginal learning contexts.

The structure of the thesis.

The thesis is developed in six chapters. I begin the first chapter by surveying the scholarship on Aboriginal education in order to provide a literature review which assesses how scholars concerned with Aboriginal Self-determination understand and respond to the historic and contemporary situation of Aboriginal education and student dis/engagement. I then narrow my focus to contemporary literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination, focusing on the ways in which scholars and educators working in Aboriginal contexts understand student engagement. I provide an overview of statistical information which highlights the current education crisis in Ontario and then bring attention to the relationship between positive identity /self-concept and academic engagement. Then, I connect education with epistemology through an overview of Indigenous critiques of western knowledge production, and review the literature on Indigenous knowledge paradigms.

In chapter two, my intent is to return to *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* in order to provide a rich description of the methodology employed by our research team. However, before I do this work, I begin by distinguishing between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, problematizing dominant Eurocentric approaches to research, and highlighting the need for a move to Indigenous methodological approaches to Aboriginal research. Having thus set the epistemological and methodological stage, I continue by providing a thick description of the Aboriginal educational narratives at Sir John A. Macdonald. I describe the process our team took when developing this

project, including the way we approached consent gathering, and then share how we, through the use of the Vision Medicine Wheel, developed our research questions. Next, I detail the Wildfire Research Method, the Indigenous methodology we employed in our project. I also explain how the team worked to develop our analysis of the narratives, and how I have organized the referencing of the *NYA WEH* transcripts in this thesis project. I conclude with a description of the research team's understanding of relations of accountability.

I present my analysis of the *NYA WEH Program* in the following three chapters. I begin the third chapter by providing a description of how I moved from the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* to this particular thesis. I link the research project to my thesis in order to show how the *NYA WEH Program* educational narratives fit into the overall project of the thesis and to show how I made my own meaning of the *NYA WEH* narratives. Next, I introduce the *NYA WEH Program*, a leading example of what is being done to support Aboriginal students. This program was developed four years before the Ontario Ministry of Education developed the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007). I provide background information regarding the development of the *NYA WEH Program* as well as a description of the material context of the program. I then move to the first area of my analysis; the Native Studies curriculum offered at this school.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on the complex relationships the cultural support workers facilitate with the people who participate in the *NYA WEH Program*. Through studying their multiple roles mentoring, tutoring, counselling, advocating between students, families, teachers, administration, and providing food and transportation support, to raising awareness of the program and program recruitment, and their vision of Self-determining education, I assess the

ways that the *NYA WEH Program* cultural support workers are integral to the success of the program.

In the fifth chapter, I contend that the third key element in the success of the *NYA WEH Program* is re-imagining culture and tradition. Student narratives show that the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* addresses gendered questions of music-making has led to significant student engagement. Specifically, I discuss the significance of the Big Drum on the lives of young women students. I argue that by negotiating new understandings of gender, family, and tradition this process of re-imagining music-making is an act of agency and a powerful symbol of student engagement.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I explore the connections and disconnections between the *NYA WEH* narratives and the body of literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination. Here I highlight the specific contributions from my analysis that could be useful to other schools and school boards as they work to support the needs of Aboriginal students. I conclude this final chapter by putting forward suggestions and recommendations to guide policy writers developing educational curriculum for the Ontario public school system, to best support and encourage Aboriginal student engagement in secondary schools across Ontario.

The purpose and contribution of the thesis.

I believe that the practices at this urban high school could contribute to better practices in other area schools that have been mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education to support Aboriginal student graduation. Thus, I explore the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* could be considered a program of ‘best practices’ that should be taken up by public schools across the province as they respond to the *Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit*

Education Policy Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). I argue that through the educational narratives of those involved in the *NYA WEH Program* we can learn what strategies promote and foster Aboriginal student engagement. Perhaps, too, we might learn what *further needs to be done* to support Aboriginal student engagement. As such, my task, too, is to be open to the possibility of limitation. There is a need to analyze, understand and identify necessary supports in order to ensure not only the graduation of Aboriginal students, but also, student Self-determination. We need to hear and learn from the stories of Aboriginal students and their communities. Exploring the educational narratives of those who participate in the *NYA WEH Program* is a way to learn from the experiences of one urban high school that works to support the cultural and educational needs of its students.

The contribution my thesis will make to theory and practice lies in the opportunity this research provides to develop theoretical connections between the contemporary experience of Aboriginal social inequality and educational initiatives which attempt to reverse that legacy. By placing the *NYA WEH* narratives side-by-side Aboriginal literature regarding Aboriginal education for Self-determination, I work to learn how to best support and encourage Aboriginal student engagement in secondary schools across Ontario. Guided by the *NYA WEH* narratives, the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*, and the literature on Aboriginal education for Self-determination, I work to bridge learner needs and educational practice. I do this work because, in the end, if we are not working toward Self-determination, we are not addressing the underlying causes of social inequalities between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities. As such, this thesis is a political project aimed at supporting opportunities for equity and justice in publicly funded schools across Ontario.

Chapter 1: Aboriginal Education and Epistemology

“The failure of non-Native education of Natives can be read as the success of Native resistance to cultural, spiritual and psychological genocide.”⁸

Introduction: Debunking the myth that education is culturally neutral.

I begin this first chapter by surveying the literature on Aboriginal education in order to explore how the contemporary issue of Aboriginal youth leaving school in 2010 must be understood as part of a larger history of colonial assimilation. Rather than simply exploring the contemporary situation, most scholars of Aboriginal education (amongst others, see Battiste, 2000, 2005; Hampton, 1995) argue that we must locate the current discussion in the context of the history and inter-generational effects of residential schooling. This scholarship explores how projects of assimilation and modernization worked through residential schools to ‘take the Indian out of the child’ and thus break the connection between Aboriginal culture, spirituality and education.

My intention is to next link education with both knowledge and research. Thus, I continue the chapter by presenting how Indigenous scholars problematize Western knowledge. From their perspectives, I present a critique of scientific positivism, as well as alternative paradigms that remain within Eurocentric thought. As I conclude the chapter, I briefly review the literature on Indigenous knowledges in order to identify how Indigenous scholars understand these differing paradigms. It is important for me to include this material in this opening chapter because of the undeniable link between education and epistemology. It is also important to do this work in the beginning of this thesis because it also helps to set

⁸ (Hampton, 1995, p. 7).

the stage for the following conversation in chapter two which will explore the relationship between Western and Indigenous epistemologies and research methodologies. For, as Kovach (2009) identifies. “epistemology and research methodology are a tightly bound, complex partnership” (p. 55).

Surveying the literature - The historical and contemporary context of Aboriginal education.

Indigenous scholars concerned with Aboriginal education for Self-determination understand the problem of Aboriginal student dis/engagement in particular ways that differ from prevailing understandings of Aboriginal education. Therefore, I start by presenting the ‘problem’ as it has been constructed by the literature on Aboriginal education for Self-determination. I present this literature and analysis in order to highlight the ways these authors see the problem of Aboriginal student dis/engagement. This is not a review of the entire history of Aboriginal education, but rather, my intent is to provide readers with an anti-colonial analysis of the contentious problem of Aboriginal education and the ways education is at the heart of a colonial and genocidal history of state policy towards Aboriginal People. Consequently, challenges to this history are central to the project of Aboriginal Self-determination. As such, there are high stakes when it comes to questions of Aboriginal student dis/engagement.

This section unfolds in the following way. First, I trace the history of Aboriginal education in Canada. Next, to contextualize the current situation of Aboriginal education in Ontario, I summarize some of the available data gathered through Statistics Canada (2006a, 2006b, 2008). I then provide an overview of the ways in which various Indigenous scholars and educators understand the contemporary issue of early leaving rates. In the conclusion of

this first section, I bring attention to the relationship between positive self-concept and academic engagement.

Tracing the history of Aboriginal education in Canada.

Pre-contact, Aboriginal communities across Turtle Island had their own systems of education. Nations had their own ways of doing education, ways that were grounded in culture and tradition and which involved the whole of the community. In particular, education was an informal process that was grounded in Aboriginal spirituality. Doige (2003) contends, “prior to contact, First Nations governance and education systems were infused with spirituality. Spirituality was paramount to all that they did” (p. 146-147 as cited in Faries, 2004, p. 3). More than just being a part of education, spirituality was central to Aboriginal Peoples’ sense of identity. Doige (2003) further writes,

The identity of an Aboriginal student is based in his or her spirituality...One’s spirituality is the inner resource that facilitates knowing oneself, one’s surroundings, and finding meaning for oneself in connection and relation to those surroundings (p.146-147). (as cited in Faries, 2004, p. 3)

Also acknowledging the spiritual context of Aboriginal education, Kirkness (1998) describes that traditional education “provided the young people with specific skills, attitudes and knowledges they needed to function in everyday life within the context of a spiritual world view” (p. 10). Youngblood Henderson (1995) is another scholar who identifies the informal nature of the community based education systems which existed across Turtle Island prior to European settlement. Identifying the role of family and community in Aboriginal education, he writes,

Education has always been a family obligation. Traditionally our elders and parents taught children our way of managing and prospering in harmony with the environment. Our communities were our classrooms, our families and our sacred order provided the methodology. ...The linguistic world-view and values were passed from generation to generation.... (p. 247)

Aboriginal education pre-contact was a communal responsibility geared to the positive development of Aboriginal children. In their policy paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972), the National Indian Brotherhood clearly articulates the importance of community in Aboriginal education when they write, “it was an education in which the community was the classroom, its members were the teachers, and each adult was responsible to ensure that each child learned how to live a good life” (as cited in Kirkness, 1999, p. 2).

Beginning in the 17th century, however, as European settlers came to Turtle Island settler society assigned itself the task of ‘educating’ Aboriginal Peoples (Kirkness, 1999). Believing that Aboriginal Peoples were ‘uncivilized’ and in need of learning European ways, Christian missionaries established what were to become known as day/mission schools for Aboriginal Peoples. Through this Western education system, Aboriginal Peoples were prevented from learning about their own cultures and were forced to learn European culture, language and religion. This approach to education was taken up because missionaries and their supporters believed that education was the best means to ‘civilize the natives’. Accordingly, through day/ mission school education, missionaries began their project of Christianization and assimilation (Kirkness, 1999, p. 2; see also Milloy, 1999; and Churchill, 2004).

Post-confederation, after the founding of the nation-state now known as Canada, the education of Aboriginal Peoples came to be a federal responsibility. As such, in the 1800s

day/mission schools gradually shifted to residential/boarding schools (Kirkness, 1999, p. 2). As the Canadian government understood it, the task for the Canadian education system was to “civilize and Christianize the Native” (Churchill, 2004) in order to socialize Aboriginal Peoples into the, by-then, dominant Christian European settler society. The residential school system, imposed on Aboriginal Peoples by European settler society, as enacted through federal legislation, is an example of the European objective to destroy Aboriginal cultures, including educational systems. Describing the educational policy of the time, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) identifies the assimilation strategy used by the Canadian state, one which was designed to ensure a monoculture.

It was a policy designed to move communities, and eventually all Aboriginal peoples, from their helpless 'savage' state to one of self-reliant 'civilization' and thus to make in Canada but one community — a non-Aboriginal, Christian one. Of all the steps taken to achieve that goal, none was more obviously a creature of Canada's paternalism toward Aboriginal people, its civilizing strategy and its stern assimilative determination than education. (Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, para.1 and 2)

Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) identifies the role of missionary schools and residential schools in the colonization of Indigenous Peoples: “Numerous accounts across nations now attest to the critical role played by schools in assimilating colonized peoples” (p. 64). Hampton (1995), too, confirms how the Western school system perpetuated European culture and civilization (p. 37).

Starting in 1879 school attendance was enforced through provisions in the *Indian Act* (Milloy, 1999, xiii) and the government, through Indian Agents and missionaries removed generations of children from their communities to institutions designed to ‘take the Indian out of the child’. Thus, according to the *United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948) it can be argued that residential schools

constituted a project of cultural genocide⁹. Built around Christian ideology, the schools were run by the churches and funded by the state. As it was required by law that all Aboriginal children attend these schools, many as young as five were forcibly removed from their families and communities. The colonial project of disconnection was furthered through legislation which prevented Aboriginal Peoples from traveling off reserve, which meant that parents were often unable to visit their children. Consequently, the state strategy to separate Aboriginal children from the influence of their parents, their communities, and the 'wigwam' (RCAP, 1996) was often successful, as there was no way for parents to legally resist the removal of their children from their homes and communities, nor was there any way for parents to visit their children at the residential schools throughout the school year. As Kirkness (1999) makes clear, "residential schools were devised as a means of isolating the Indian child from his parents and the influence of the reserve" (p. 3). The RCAP (1996) further identifies the strategies employed by church and state in order to 'rescue' Aboriginal children from their 'evil surroundings',

The common wisdom of the day that animated the educational plans of church and state was that Aboriginal children had to be rescued from their "evil surroundings", isolated from parents, family and community, and "kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions". (Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, 1.1, para. 9)

Aboriginal education policy, however, was not solely motivated by a desire to 'civilize'. Critical analysis shows that educational policies were also developed to support European expansion throughout Turtle Island. Quoted in the RCAP (1996) Aboriginal leader George Manuel, a survivor of the residential school system, identifies the ways that colonial

⁹ For further information regarding the cultural genocide of Aboriginal Peoples, see also Churchill, 2004, p. 1-11. As Churchill (2004) argues, "the deliberate destruction of cultures kills individuals just as surely as do guns and poison gas, especially when combined with imposition of the sorts of slow death measures which all but invariably attend such undertakings. There is thus no way in which cultural genocide may be reasonably set apart from physical and biological genocide as a 'lesser' sort of crime" (p. 7).

education “was designed to make room for European expansion into a vast empty wilderness” (Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, para.9). As acknowledged in the RCAP (1996), Aboriginal education policy was thus developed in a three part vision. The first stage was the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents and communities. Second, through the school system, children were to be ‘re-socialized’ into European culture. The third aspect of this vision involved re-integrating Aboriginal youth back into their communities, where they, in turn, could continue assimilationist socialization of their parents (Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, 1.1, para. 2). Some critical research supports a more ambivalent reading of residential schools, in particular the need to be more attentive to the contradictory character of Aboriginal education. Showing how some young Aboriginal women used education to challenge the intentions of the church and State, Fiske’s (1996) research draws attention to the agency and resistance of Aboriginal youth in educational settings. For example, some Aboriginal women used their education to gain access into the workforce and then as a way to return to community to take up leadership roles. These acts of resistance are important and speak to the various ways in which people resist assimilationist education.

Through federal legislation, Aboriginal parents and their communities were most often blocked from having power or control over the education of their children. This educational policy was not a benign process. Rather, it was geared to elevation of Western knowledge systems while at the same time the denigration of Indigenous knowledges and cultures. As Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) observe, “In forcing assimilation and acculturation to Eurocentric knowledge, modern governments and educational systems have displaced Indigenous knowledge (as cited in Battiste, 2005, para. 25). In addition to the cultural genocide promoted through residential schools, evidence shows that it was not

uncommon for students to also experience physical, mental and sexual abuse. These brutal conditions are identified by Kirkness (1999) who reports,

The residential school was notable for its high mortality rate among students. At the turn of the century, an estimated 50% of the children who attended these schools did not benefit from the education they received. They died while at the boarding school of diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis. It is believed that many died of loneliness. Only recently, has the general public become aware of the true devastation suffered by many former residential school students as they reveal the physical, mental and sexual abuse encountered under this colonial regime. (p. 3)

Youngblood Henderson (1995) adds to the critique of Aboriginal education claiming that residential schools were designed to destroy Aboriginal Peoples' consciousness. As he contends, "federal government regulations were not benign intrusions; they were deliberate psychological experiments which attempted to destroy First Nations consciousness" (p. 254). These policies and practices were violations of treaty rights. As established, treaty rights ensured that, if desired, Aboriginal Peoples could have access to European education. However, Aboriginal Nations never gave permission for the Canadian government to take control of Aboriginal education. Thus, Youngblood Henderson (1995) argues that by breaching education treaty agreements between the British Crown and Aboriginal Nations, the Canadian government implemented strategies which denied Aboriginal Peoples their rights to control the education of their community members. As he articulates,

Thus, under the guides of 'advisable education,' the Department of Indian Affairs implemented several different education strategies. These went beyond the delegated scope of the treaties. They interfered with the customary educational system, took children away from families by placing them in federal boarding schools, denied them their cultural and language rights, and deliberately imposed a foreign culture, language and values on them. This process failed, although it almost destroyed First Nations culture. It was a breach of the treaties, which place education exclusively under First Nations customary jurisdiction. (p. 254)

By the 1970s, as a result of increasing public pressure on the Canadian government and the growing political pressure from Aboriginal groups for an end to segregated schooling, there was a gradual shift in Aboriginal education policy (RCAP, Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, 1.2, para. 8 and 9). Financial barriers also, however, prevented the continuation of the residential school system. As Churchill (2004) insightfully comments, “that some native children escaped such processing had far less to do with the ambitions of those administering the system than with the fact that U.S. / Canadian settler states ultimately proved unwilling to allot sufficient resources to the task (p. 13). Recognizing it could no longer maintain its current position on the education of Aboriginal Peoples, the Canadian state shifted its policy toward the secularization of education, ending its relationship with the churches (RCAP, Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, 1.2, para. 26). The state’s new direction was on-reserve day schools, as well as integrated schooling through the public school system (RCAP, Volume 1, Part two, Chapter 10, 1.2, para. 8).

Concurrently, an important issue regarding control of education was being put forward by the National Indian Brotherhood. As proposed in their policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972) “Aboriginal Peoples, rather than the federal government, should be controlling educational programs” (as cited in Mattson & Caffrey, 2001, p. 16). Following the release of this policy paper, the Canadian government began to transfer control to reserve schools (Faries, 2004, p. 3). However, as Faries (2004) identifies, there were two significant barriers to the success of reserve schools (1) lack of freedom to include Aboriginal content in the curriculum, as well as (2) lack of funding to support the schools (p. 3). As Faries (2004) articulates,

First Nations have been required to sign funding agreements where they must follow provincial standards and guidelines. These agreements only ensure the continued

deprivation of First Nations learning. Non-Aboriginal knowledge has been built within the school system and the exclusion of First Nations cultural content in the curriculum is still the norm. (p. 3)

Faries (2004) further concludes that, effectively, the colonial education system was simply being administered by First Nations (p. 3). Kirkness (1998) too speaks of the reserve school transfer process, identifying the problem of reserve schools simply facilitating assimilationist schooling. She contends that two fundamental barriers (1) First Nations administration of colonial education, and (2) First Nations insecurity to develop education grounded in an Indigenous epistemology, blocked the implementation of *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Describing these challenges Kirkness (1998) writes,

Sadly, the policy has not unfolded as was expected. Two factors have been at play that have negatively affected the process. One was the manipulation of Indian Affairs to have us simply administer the school as they had in the past. The second was our own peoples' insecurity in taking control and failing to design education that would be based on our culture, our way of life, and most important our world view (p. 11). (as cited in Mattson & Caffrey, 2001, p. 23)

In conjunction with the barriers to reserve schools, barriers to the success of integrated schooling existed as Aboriginal youth in the publicly funded school system continued to receive a Eurocentric curriculum. Lanigan's (1998) research demonstrates that starting in the 1950s the publicly funded school system in Canada, which supported prevailing epistemological orientations, continued to work to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples into dominant, non-Aboriginal society. The integrationist approach to education is arguably not substantially different than the federal legislation that gave rise to residential schools or the reserve school system. Lanigan (1998) further identifies that advocates of the integrationist model saw schooling as a tool of assimilation. As she writes, integrationists

...have assimilation as their goal and see education as the tool to bring about uniformity of values and beliefs, which will in turn make Canada a better place for one and all, with equality of people and opportunity in the forefront. (p. 104)

Youngblood Henderson (1995) too argues that through integrated education Aboriginal youth are being assimilated into dominant Eurocentric culture. As he expresses, based on notions of national liberal equality, the goal of the public education system was to replace Aboriginal identity with a unified 'Canadian' identity. As he explains, "This was a transparent attempt to win student allegiance to the larger order through immersion in mainstream education" (p. 254). Chief Dan George (1972) further argues,

You talk big words of integration in the schools. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration....unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence....and the walls are as high as the mountain range. (as cited in Kirkness, 1999, p. 5)

In the aftermath of the residential school system, the reserve school system and integrated schools were seen by the Canadian state as a way of improving the deplorable social, economic and political conditions experienced by Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Some scholars argue, however, that the reserve schools and the publicly funded education system in Ontario continued to employ an assimilationist model. Through a curriculum that was designed around Eurocentric values and culture, Aboriginal Peoples continue to be assimilated into dominant school culture and society at large. As Hampton (1995) holds, "the contemporary North American school is a political, social, and cultural institution that embodies and transmits the values, knowledge, and behaviours of white society" (p. 37).

The contemporary situation is that the closing of the reserve schools and the integration of Aboriginal youth into publicly funded schools has also coincided with an increasing population shift of Aboriginal communities into urban areas (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2007). Young Aboriginal women and men educated through the public school system are still receiving a Eurocentric education. Youngblood Henderson (1995) contends that integrated schooling is not the right path for Aboriginal communities because control of Aboriginal education is still in the hands of the Canadian government. As he argues, “Physical integration in provincial schools may be justified as good for society, but it cannot be justified as good for Indian children and students. It was not a student-centered undertaking of First Nations choice” (p. 254). In its document *Our Children: Keepers of the Sacred Knowledge – Final Report of the Minister’s National Working Group on Education* (Canada, 2002), the Canadian government also identifies the ways that education has been imposed on Aboriginal Peoples, while disregarding Aboriginal culture and knowledge systems. As the Minister’s National Working Group on Education acknowledges,

When we examine First Nations education historically, a pattern emerges that consists of a system of education that for the most part has been imposed on First Nations students with blatant disregard for First Nations languages, cultures and collective knowledge and wisdom. (as cited in Faries, 2004, p. 1)

From assimilation to Self-determination: The continuum of Aboriginal education¹⁰.

The literature on Aboriginal education posits that there are two opposing orientations that determine contemporary conflicts over Aboriginal education: the first is described as assimilationist and has been developed within the integrationist model of education, while the other, which I describe as education for Self-determination, resists the prevailing

¹⁰ Lanigan (1998) constructs a continuum of approaches to Aboriginal education which she defines as moving from assimilation to liberation (p. 104). Although Lanigan utilizes the language of “liberation” and I utilize the language of “Self-determination”, we are referring to the same body of literature. Hermes (2005) utilizes the language of “a culture-based movement in Native American education” and/or “Self-determination for Indian education” (p. 43) to describe this body of literature.

education system. For educators operating from an assimilationist / integrationist perspective, the education system itself was not, nor is it now, up for discussion. Rather, efforts continue to be focused on failure rates of Aboriginal students within the established publicly funded education system. The assimilationist / integrationist approach to Aboriginal education is problematized in the literature as leaving Aboriginal youth in classrooms that are still Eurocentric in their focus. Aboriginal learners continued to be seen as ‘the problem’ and pathologized.

Lanigan (1998) constructs a continuum of approaches defined by the two poles identified above. At the assimilationist end of the continuum are scholars who, in the late 1980s and early 1990s “did not question the validity of the system itself” (Lanigan, 1998, p. 105). Although these scholars are concerned to support Aboriginal student success, the problem with their approach is that they do not question or work to change the public school system itself. Consequently, this integration-oriented scholarship does not support the root principle ‘Indian control of Indian education’ (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Aboriginal youth are still being taught by non-Aboriginals and the non-Aboriginal community is still greatly influencing the direction of Aboriginal education. Thus, the ideology of integrationist education is fundamentally in conflict with Aboriginal Peoples inherent right to Aboriginal education for Self-determination. Burns (2000) explains,

In mainstream schools, curriculum content and curriculum processes fail to acknowledge, reflect, or reinforce the social fact that the Native Peoples are a distinct and unique peoples, a self-determining peoples, a self-governing peoples, a peoples who are striving to regain control over institutions affecting them (p. 162). (as cited in Mattson & Caffrey, 2001, p. 11)

As Aboriginal educators and scholars observe, Aboriginal education is still commonly understood as the education of Aboriginal Peoples by non-Aboriginal Peoples, within a non-Aboriginal structure (Hampton, 1995, p. 6). As Mattson and Caffrey (2001) acknowledge,

Although changes have taken place since the production and dissemination of *Indian Control of Indian Education*, Aboriginal education continues to be influenced by the external voices of the state and the educational community. (p. 17)

Lanigan (1998) suggests that further along the continuum are scholars who shift the analysis to Aboriginal learning differences. She contends that this body of literature is moving in the right direction as it moves away from the ‘all the same’ integrationist literature. The argument put forward by these scholars is that Aboriginal children, impacted by Aboriginal child-rearing practices, have developed learning styles that are different from the rest of the student population (for a summary of these arguments see Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 159). Scholars concerned with learning style differences thus call for modified teaching and learning strategies in order to better support Aboriginal learners in the public school system. Literature at the Self-determination end of the continuum, however, responds critically to learning style analysis. These emerging responses take issue with literature that supports a uniquely Aboriginal learning style. Supporters of Aboriginal Self-determination argue that such an analysis only continues to pathologize Aboriginal Peoples’ “cognitive capacities and child-rearing practices” (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 162). Furthermore, research differentiating “right-brain, left-brain learners” is full of contradictions and inconsistencies (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 161). For example, it is argued that there is actually no greater difference in Aboriginal learning styles than in non-Aboriginal leaning styles. As Hodgson-Smith (2000) writes, “the research on the learning styles of Aboriginal students does not yield results that are significantly different from what is found in non-Aboriginal students”

(p. 162). Additionally, More (1987a, 1987b) is critical to this approach to Aboriginal education declaring that “overemphasis on learning style differences may lead to a new form of inaccurate labelling and stereotyping (as cited in Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 161). Thus, a learning style approach to Aboriginal education is inappropriate, both for the ways it pathologizes as well as leads to negative stereotyping of Aboriginal Peoples. Ultimately, the contention is that investigation of learning style differences remains a continuation of an integrationist / assimilationist approach to Aboriginal education. The purpose remains to find ways to support Aboriginal academic success within the public school system, without actually exploring the inherent problems within the education system.

In the mid-to-late 1990’s a new school of thought emerged regarding Aboriginal education and the needs of Aboriginal learners. Lanigan (1998) identifies this body of literature to be at the liberation end of the continuum of Aboriginal education. Indigenous scholars concerned with issues of Aboriginal Self-determination have begun to look to education as a means of liberation from economic, as well as social and political oppression (Battiste, 2000, 2005; Cajete, 1994; Deloria, 1991b; Ermine, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Youngblood Henderson, 1993). These scholars, amongst others, argue that the continuation of government control over Aboriginal Peoples can also be observed in integrated schooling. Thus, the literature developed by these scholars departs from a modernist perspective in that it argues for Aboriginal education for Self-determination. This literature focuses on issues of control, knowledge production, curriculum, identity, language and traditions, and Self-determination. As these scholars clarify, although it is imperative for Aboriginal youth to achieve a high school diploma, economic-based arguments in relation to education are part of a larger assimilationist agenda. As Lanigan (1998) identifies, these scholars are,

...examining the education system and recognizing its inability to provide meaningful education for First Nations students. Instead of just trying to adjust the system, they are investigating Aboriginal epistemology and pedagogy. (p. 106)

Beyond the economically motivated and utilitarian rationale that supports increased graduation rates there is a growing concern that it is important for Aboriginal youth to experience a high school environment that reflects and embraces their cultural heritage. Aboriginal students need to be able to see their own lived experiences reflected in the school environment. Thus, those concerned with resisting assimilationist educational strategies argue that it is imperative that efforts be made to modify the education system in Ontario. These changes are meant to support not only the academic achievement of Aboriginal youth, but also Aboriginal youth Self-determination. These scholars support Aboriginal youth as they “Walk in two worlds” (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberly, 2010), learning from both Aboriginal knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems. As Lanigan (1998) identifies of this scholarship,

Seeing the importance of retaining and passing on Aboriginal knowledge, as well as providing First Nations with the dominant society’s knowledge, these writers are proposing the use of traditional pedagogies to impart both systems of education. The result is meaningful education that preserves a First Nations world-view.... (p. 106)

Hampton (1995) describes ‘schooling for assimilation’ and ‘schooling for self-determination’ as two opposed approaches to Aboriginal education. Schooling for assimilation, he maintains, is “the education of Indians...carried out by Anglos using Anglo models to satisfy Anglo purposes (American Indian Policy Review Commission 1976)” (p. 9). He further maintains that this approach to Aboriginal education has assimilation as its goal and is characterized by “high failure rates in literacy and educational attainment, poor school-community relations, negative attitudes toward Native cultures, and prohibition or

non-use of Native languages (Oleksa & Dauenhauer, 1982). (p. 9). Schooling for Self-determination, on the other hand, is described by Hampton as characterized by “the use of Native languages, positive attitudes towards Native cultures, good school-community relations, and emphasis on self-determination rather than assimilation (p. 9). As Hampton’s research determines, although there are various ways to do Aboriginal education, educational projects that truly support and enhance Aboriginal Self-determination, contain particular components. Working with “a small group of highly articulate Indian educators”, Hampton developed a theory of Indigenous Education. Explaining the need for a theoretical approach to Indian Education, Hampton writes that “a theoretical articulation would serve to organize research, guide practice, and serve as an explicit aid to discussion and clarification” (p. 11). As Hampton’s research concludes in his ‘theory of Indian Education’, particular standards are necessary to support Aboriginal Self-determination; spirituality, service, diversity, culture, tradition, respect, history, relentlessness, vitality, conflict, place and transformation.

In chapter 6, I will return to Lanigan’s (1998) continuum of Aboriginal education, as well as Hampton’s (1995) standards and theory of Indian Education, as I bring the *NYA WEH* narratives to bear on this literature. My aim in so doing is to determine if the *NYA WEH Program* is a model of Self-determining education that could serve as a guide to other schools as they work to respond to the needs of Aboriginal youth in Ontario.

The current situation of Aboriginal education.

Critical educators concerned for those on the margins of the education system are engaged in a sociological analysis of the effects of the contemporary public school system in Ontario on Aboriginal students (Curriculum Services Canada, 2008). Calling for ‘equity

outcome' scholars and educators working in Aboriginal contexts argue that Aboriginal student graduation rates are greatly hindered by the dominant discourses within the Canadian education system¹¹. Increasingly, Aboriginal youth in Canada have been achieving a high school diploma via the public school system. Research shows, however, that in comparison to non-Aboriginal youth, graduation rates are dramatically lower. As Guimond and Cooke (2008, p. 28-29) identify,

- In 1981, only 75.3% of Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15-29 had achieved a grade nine or higher education. This compares to 94.7% for non-Aboriginal youth
- By 2001, 90.3% of Aboriginal youth achieved a grade nine education. This compares to 97.7% for non-Aboriginal youth
- However, only 50.5% of Aboriginal People between the ages of 20-24, and 60.6% of Aboriginal People between the ages of 25-29, obtained a high school certificate in 2001. This compares respectively to 84.4% and 85.9% for non-Aboriginal people
- In 2001, Aboriginal Peoples have the lowest educational attainments of any demographic group in Canada

To further contextualize the current situation of Aboriginal education in Ontario, I summarize some of the available data gathered through the *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Family, Community and Child Care* (Statistics Canada, 2008). Statistics Canada shows that in the province of Ontario, the Aboriginal population grew from 188,315 to 242,495, a 28.3% increase between 2001 and 2006. The Ontario Ministry of Education estimates that 55,312 Aboriginal students are currently enrolled in provincial elementary and secondary schools (2007). The Ministry also reports that the level of Aboriginal student dis/engagement from the publicly funded high school system is, on average, twice as high as non-Aboriginal

¹¹The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat identifies strategies for student success. As they identify, the sixth strategy, 'Mobilization of the System to Provide Equity in Student Outcomes', calls on educators "to become aware of the issues and challenges that face Aboriginal students" (Curriculum Services Canada, 2008).

Canadians. Further data published in the *Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 33-35) show that:

- 1.7% of the total population in Ontario is Aboriginal
- 46% of the Aboriginal population are youth under the age of 25
- 42% of the Aboriginal population in Ontario, age 15 and over, have less than a high school diploma. This compares to 29% of the non-Aboriginal population who have less than a high school diploma
- Furthermore, only 6% of Aboriginal Peoples have completed a university degree compared to 17% of other Canadians

Critical research demonstrates that the dominant school culture in Canada still works to serve white, elitist, Eurocentric interests (see Alfred, 1999; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997). As Battiste (2005) asserts, the public school system still forwards a colonial ideology. She writes,

But public schooling has not been benign. It has been used as a means to perpetuate damaging myths about Aboriginal cultures, languages, beliefs, and ways of life. It has also established western knowledge and science as dominant modes of thought that distrusts diversity and jeopardizes us all as we move into the next century. (para. 46)

Additionally, hegemonic ideologies that arise from colonization, cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism have shaped the cultural norms, codes, and expectations that underlie the assessment and determination of student 'success or failure'. Both the overt curriculum, as well as the 'hidden curriculum', "through which the attitudes and behaviours of teachers and other school agents convey specific messages to students" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 72), are specifically constructed to maintain the privilege of those who embody the hegemonic position. As a result, those relegated to the margins and those with competing stories and perspectives, are marked as distinct, treated as objects, and excluded from participation in

school culture; in effect, those outside the hegemonic cluster are “problematized and pathologized” (see Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Thus the social exclusion of youth outside the hegemonic cluster works to begin a gradual process of youth ‘fading out’ of the institution¹². As Dei et al.’s (1997) research illustrates, Black youth in Ontario also experience social exclusion in ways which ultimately lead to a process of fading out and disengagement from the school system. Educators working in Aboriginal contexts make similar connections about Aboriginal youth who also experience marginalization within the mainstream¹³ school system, and the process of disengagement (see for example, Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier & Archibald, 1997; Hampton, 1995; Kirkness, 1998, 1999). When students do not see themselves reflected in school culture, their sense of cultural identity is eroded as is their sense of self worth (see Bosacki, 1995; Chandler, 2005; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Dei et al. (1997) echo a similar understanding when they write, “when students do not see themselves or their interest represented, they develop a fatalistic attitude about themselves, their education and their future” (p. 69).

Through continuation of cultural imperialism and ideological domination the Euro-settler society represses Aboriginal culture and works to undermine and devalue the identity of Aboriginal Peoples. This legacy has produced an identity crisis. Adams (1999) shares a personal account of the devastating effects of colonialism on identity construction:

We are taught to suppress and hide our Aboriginality...Through the politics of colonization we were made to believe that we were inferior, stupid, lazy and worthless...It urged me to reject my past and create an artificial self-image...Self-hatred naturally followed.... (Introduction)

¹² ‘Fading out’ is a concept employed by Dei et al. (1997) to describe the process of gradual student disengagement from the school system. This process of fading out impedes graduation rates for youth outside of the prevailing cultural learning environment.

¹³ In order to remain consistent with the literature on Aboriginal education, I use the language of ‘mainstream’. I use this language to identify prevailing, dominant ideologies and practices as determined by the settler society.

Adams (1999) further explains,

After 500 years of colonial oppression Indians, Métis and Inuit have internalized a colonized consciousness. The colonizer's distorted stories have become 'universal truths' to maintain mainstream values and have reduced Aboriginal culture to a caricature... distorting all Indigenous experiences, past and present. Blocking the road to self-determination. (Introduction)

However, a process of self-identification and self-definition has begun. This new 'Indian consciousness' is described by Adams (1999) as necessary to the survival and liberation of Indigenous Peoples, for, "without an Indigenous consciousness, Indians', Métis', and Inuit's only claim to Aboriginality is race and heritage. That is not enough to achieve true liberation" (p. 42).

Scholars concerned with Aboriginal education for Self-determination argue that a critical understanding of early school leaving places this phenomenon along-side the history of Aboriginal education in Canada. Only then, it is argued, can 'the problem' of student dis/engagement from the public school system be properly contextualized. Aboriginal students face unique challenges which include the intergenerational impact of residential schooling (Milloy, 1999). These historical experiences greatly impacted Aboriginal Peoples, leaving communities fearful of Western education systems.

Socially produced and constructed, social institutions are integral to the ways in which knowledge is shaped. Education, as a public institution, creates and communicates knowledge and has been linked to colonialism and imperialism. Educational institutions have been and continue to be used to deny Aboriginal knowledges. Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) insist that the current education system negatively impacts Aboriginal student achievement. As they write, "the exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge in education has failed First Nations children (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003)" (as cited in Battiste, 2005,

para. 25). Given that cultural and social values are embedded and reproduced in schools and through education, I consider how social justice is possible in education. Throughout the thesis I continue these lines of thought as I posit what anti-oppressive education might look like. In the following section, as I examine the relationship between education and epistemology, I contemplate how systems of domination shape what we know, how we know, and how social institutions communicate those ideas. In addition, I explore the possibilities of building alliances to challenge the values promoted through residential schools.

Paradigm wars - The project of Western knowledge production.

Indigenous scholars concerned with Self-determination hold particular ideas about the ways that the colonial process has affected Indigenous knowledge paradigms. These scholars are concerned to problematize the project of Western knowledge production as intrinsic to the project of colonization. Strong arguments about Western knowledge production and colonialism are also linked to the contemporary situation of Aboriginal education. For example, scholars build the case that education is about the transmission of cultural values and ideas. Thus, questions about who controls education are of utmost importance: we cannot understand the problem of early school leaving in the present unless we understand those underpinnings which are part of the Western knowledge system.

Western knowledge systems and practices are linked to colonial violence that renders the 'other' inferior, while at the same time mark Indigenous bodies as both deviant and invisible. In her foundational work, Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues that Western ideas of superiority and claims of being 'advanced' and 'more developed' classifies Indigenous

knowledges as inferior and Eurocentric knowledges as superior. This thinking led to beliefs that non-Europeans were ‘child-like’, ‘not fully human’ and ‘less developed morally, economically and socially’. As such, Europeans had the obligation to rule any non-European culture. These systems of beliefs justified colonialism and the implementation of a European value system and way of life. Western knowledge was being used as a tool of domination and perpetuated inequitable power relations. As Kirby and McKenna (1989) identify, “knowledge is being used to maintain oppressive relationships” (p. 15).

Indigenous scholars argue that the European project of colonization is founded on knowledge practices of coding, classification and control. In Western scientific investigation, observation and experimentation lead to ever-expanding ordering and control of the world through categorization. It is through this science of control over nature projected onto all of existence that European scientific thought has exerted its power, authority and superiority over other paradigms of knowledge. While such systems of classification were prized as neutral based on the intrinsic value of things in and of themselves, the socially-constructed nature and effects of coding and classification have been coming increasingly into view.

Codes and classifications supported a hierarchy which functioned to place the West’s scientific thought paradigm above all others. It is through codes and classifications that ‘the other’ is created. People and things are manipulated and artificially placed in a hierarchy in order to be controlled. Through the coding of ‘others’, European positivist thought, in the name of science, articulated its domination. Used in an agenda of imperialism, this European knowledge paradigm achieved its power in the naming of the world. A classification system which humiliates and brutalizes on a daily basis and which relegates ‘others’ to the status of inferior, privileges its form of knowledge production over others. A hierarchy of knowledges

is developed by the West, a hierarchy which positions Western, European scientific thought as superior. This dominating knowledge paradigm, which is centered in Western universalism, serves to support Eurocentric understandings of knowledge production and dissemination. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) articulate, “the Eurocentric strategy of universal definitions and absolute knowledge” (p. 38) was central to the positivist project. Thus, working to subordinate all other forms of knowing, Western positivism effectively ignored diverse knowledge paradigms and worldviews.

The Western science and knowledge paradigm was pivotal to the colonial project and remains central to efforts to modernize and assimilate Indigenous Peoples around the world and lay claim to their lands and resources. As Battiste (2005) expresses, “cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values” (para. 48). Identifying the relationship between the emergence of modernity and the privileging of the scientific model, Kovach (2005) writes,

While the scientific method was producing knowledge benefiting society, the problem was that it was becoming privileged. As positivism took increasingly more space to serve science, it squeezed out alternative forms of knowledge. (p. 22)

Thus began the paradigm wars. The marginalization, erasure and imperial denial of Aboriginal knowledge systems were a form of oppression and domination and also, a form of colonial violence. As Shiva (1993) contends,

The first level of violence unleashed on local systems of knowledge is not to see them as knowledge. This invisibility is the first reason why local systems collapse without trial and test when confronted with the knowledge of the dominant west. (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 17)

Through globalization, the West's positioning of itself also led to the subjugation of Indigenous worldviews (see Ermine, 1995, p. 102). As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) writes, Western knowledge systems supported imperial dominance,

The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge. This form of global knowledge is generally referred to as 'universal' knowledge, available to all and not really 'owned' by anyone, that is, until non-Western scholars make claims to it. (p. 63)

Indigenous scholars concerned with Self-determination argue that fundamental to the project of colonialism, universalist approaches to knowledge functioned to define particular knowledges as legitimate (see for example Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). In so doing, this approach to knowledge relegates Indigenous worldviews to the margins, blocking alternative contributions. As Kovach (2005) articulates, Eurocentrism positioned positivism in a way that privileged this way of knowing over other ways of knowing. The unmistakable damage of the colonial project which was grounded in imperialist values systems and ideas, hence, led to the destruction of Indigenous communities and cultures.

It is important to note that as Western positivism marginalized Indigenous knowledges, it also marginalized other knowledge paradigms. Social movements including world-wide resistance against colonization, feminist movements, Black power, and lesbian and gay movements all provided a context for speaking back and resisting epistemic subordination. Each of these movements developed oppositional perspectives which critiqued positivist assumptions. Concerned with subjugated and disqualified knowledges, this work deconstructed universalist assumptions. As Herr and Anderson (2005) note, these knowledge paradigms are concerned with issues of "who creates knowledge, how it is created, who uses it, [and] for what purposes" (p. 67). Indigenous scholars point out, however, that while these

literatures critique Western scientific positivism, many remain Eurocentric and modernizing in orientation. They also argue that many of these knowledge paradigms are fundamentally in conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing the world. For example, Western feminism in its varied forms has been heavily critiqued in Indigenous literature (see for example, Kuokkanen, 2007; Yee, 2011), Challenging hegemonic Western scientific thought, Indigenous knowledges emerging from Indigenous epistemologies¹⁴ present alternative understandings of knowledge and the production of knowledge.

Indigenous knowledges: Knowledge paradigms geared toward inner knowing.

Due to policies and practices of assimilation, Indigenous knowledges are at a crisis situation and are nearing extinction. As Battiste (2005) writes,

The persistent and aggressive assimilation plan of the Canadian government and churches throughout the past century, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge in educational institutions committed to Eurocentric knowledge, and the losses to Aboriginal languages and heritages through modernization and urbanization of Aboriginal people have all contributed to the diminished capacity of Indigenous knowledge, with the result that it is now in danger of becoming extinct. (para. 5)

And yet, the colonial project has not been completed. Indigenous Peoples fight back, holding on to their cultures, traditions and sets of knowledges as they work toward Indigenous Self-determination. Battiste (2005) identifies, regardless of Eurocentric dismissal and denial of the existence of Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous knowledges have always been present.

¹⁴ What is meant by knowledge is the substance of knowing. Indigenous knowledges are grounded in, amongst other elements, time on territory, living on land, cultural and physical reproduction, and relationship with human and non-human beings. As Battiste (2008) describes, Indigenous knowledge is “derived from the immediate ecology; from peoples’ experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and memory including experiences shared with others; and from the spiritual world discovered in dreams, visions, inspirations, and signs interpreted with the guidance of healers or elders” (p. 499). What is meant by epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge. Wilson (2008) describes epistemology as “how we think about or know this reality (p. 13)...It includes entire systems of thinking or styles of cognitive functioning that are built upon specific ontologies” (p. 33).

Whether or not it has been acknowledged by the Eurocentric mainstream, Indigenous knowledge has always existed. The recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of empowerment by Indigenous people. (para. 2)

Indigenous Peoples have long argued that they have their own ways of knowing and that these knowledges are valuable and extensive (Battiste, 2005, para. 16). Recently, the value of Indigenous knowledges has become recognized by the Canadian state. As Battiste (2005) outlines, “In Canada, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, building on many studies that preceded it (see Assembly of First Nations 1988, 1992), has unequivocally stated the importance of Indigenous knowledge” (para. 11). Battiste and Henderson (2000) further identify the constitutional protection of Indigenous knowledge in Canadian law. As they contend, “Indigenous knowledge is constitutionally protected in Canada law as Aboriginal and treaty rights” (as cited in Battiste, 2005, para. 41). And yet, through neo-colonialism, Indigenous knowledges continue to face marginalization. For example, as Indigenous knowledges slowly gain legitimacy in the West, western knowledge continues to seek a universal definition of what Indigenous knowledge is. This situation is challenging for Indigenous scholars who acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous thought. Battiste and Henderson (2000) put forward, “Eurocentric thought demands universal definitions of Indigenous knowledge, even though Indigenous scholars have established no common usage of the term” (p. 36). Rejecting Eurocentric demands for fixed definitions, Indigenous scholars do, however, present particular core understandings of some of the characteristics and sources of Indigenous epistemology.

Conceptualizing the differences between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, Ermine (1995) describes Western philosophies of knowledge as “keeping everything

separate” (p. 102) and as holding a “fragmented self-world view” (p. 110). Writing, for example, that Western science “fragments, atomizes thought, and restricts the capacity for holism” (p.103), Ermine argues that one of the underlying assumptions in Western thought is “that the universe can be understood and controlled through atomism” (p. 102). This claim to objectively know, and fragment self-from-world, serves to “deny the practice of inwardness and fortitude to achieve holism” (p.103). Ermine (1995) thus explains that European knowledges work to understand the physical reality by searching outward, while Indigenous knowledges are geared toward inner knowing that emerges from an Indigenous epistemology. As he writes,

Those people who seek knowledge on the physical plane objectively find their answers through exploration of the outer space, solely on the corporeal level. Those who seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different, incorporeal knowledge paradigm that might be termed Aboriginal epistemology. (p. 103)

Indigenous theories which develop from this inward, connected experience of knowing and which extend from Indigenous epistemologies, thus confront and contest Western epistemologies and Western understandings of the ways in which knowledges are produced. Brant Castellano (2004) further explains that,

In Aboriginal knowledge systems, the boundary between material and spiritual realms is easily crossed. Similarly, the boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and natural elements are also permeable. This is represented in traditional stories of communication between humans and other beings, and transformation of persons into animals and sea creatures, or vice versa. (p. 103)

Wilson (2001) identifies a key difference between these knowledge paradigms - the notion of knowledge ownership,

The dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity; the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is

something that is gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of Creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. (p. 176)

As Ermine (1995) contends, “Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown” (p. 108). Writing further, Ermine clarifies that Indigenous epistemology is foremost centered in a personal spiritual experience of the universe. As he notes, through exploration of the ‘inner self’ the knower comes to discover great knowledge of the universe.

Understanding of the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must be thought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing. Ultimately it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life’s mysteries. It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self. (p. 108)

In the following passage, Kovach (2005), too, attempts to describe Indigenous epistemology. Reviewing the literature, she writes that Indigenous knowledges are concerned with storytelling, dreams, and visions and is organic, arising from interrelationships. As she writes, Indigenous knowledge

Includes a way of knowing that is fluid (Little Bear, 2000) and experiential, derived from teachings transmitted from generation to generation by storytelling; each story is alive with the nuances and wisdom of the storyteller (King, 2003). It emerges from traditional languages emphasizing verbs, not nouns (Cajete, 1999). It involves a knowing within the subconscious that is garnered through dreams and vision (Castellano, 2000). It is a knowledge that is both intuitive and quiet. Indigenous ways of knowing arise from interrelationships with the human world, the spirit, and the inanimate entities of the ecosystem (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Indigenous ways of knowing encompass the spirit of collectivity, reciprocity, and respect (Wilson, 2001). It is born of the land and locality of the tribe. Indigenous knowledge ought to be purposeful and practical. It is born of the necessity to feed, clothe, and transmit

values. As such the method of knowing must be practical and purposeful. Indigenous ways of knowing are organic with emphasis on reciprocity and humour. These ways of knowing are both cerebral and heartfelt. As the elders say, “If you have important things to say, speak from the heart”. (p. 27-28)

Connecting Indigenous knowledges to land, Battiste (2005) writes that particular landscapes lead to particular knowledges,

Indigenous knowledge is also inherently tied to land, not to land in general but to particular landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are properly held, stories properly recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated (see Morphy, 1995; Basso, 1996). (para. 40)

Battiste (2005) further outlines the shifting nature of Indigenous knowledge, writing that “Indigenous knowledge is an adaptable, dynamic system based on skills, abilities, and problem-solving techniques that change over time depending on environmental conditions...” (para. 33). Further adding to discussions about characteristics of Indigenous knowledges, Battiste and Henderson (2000) comment on the holistic nature of such knowledges, sharing that central to Indigenous knowledges are relationships between all living beings and the environment. As they write,

In addition, many definitions of Indigenous knowledge stress that it is the principle of totality or holism. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples views Indigenous knowledge “as a cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and their environment” (RCAP 1996b, 4:454). (p. 42)

In the same text, these two scholars deduce that ultimately, Indigenous knowledges are concerned with “relationships between people, their ecosystems, and the other living beings and spirits that share their land” (p. 41). Thus, concerned with community relationships and

the interconnectedness of learning Indigenous knowledges challenge mainstream knowledge systems and the subjugation of Indigenous ways of knowing.

In addition to discussions regarding characteristics of Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous scholars have identified various sources of Indigenous knowledge. For example, Brant Castellano (2000) identifies three overlapping categories pertaining to sources of knowledge which she understands to be useful when examining Indigenous knowledges. These sources of Indigenous knowledge include traditional knowledge, empirical knowledge, and revealed knowledge. Traditional knowledge, as presented by Brant Castellano, is knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation. Local in context, it is concerned with knowledges regarding creation stories, the origins of clans, ancestral rights to territory, boundaries and treaties, relations with nations, as well as various other knowledges which work to guide civil society (p. 23). Traditional knowledges serve to establish values and beliefs and are usually passed down by community Elders. Effectively, traditional knowledges were stolen from Aboriginal communities in Canada. A second source of Indigenous knowledge is empirical knowledge. As in the West, this source of knowledge is acquired through careful observation. As Waldram (1986) makes clear, “knowledge is created from observation by many persons over extended time periods” (as cited in Brant Castellano, 2000, p. 23). In Indigenous communities, however,

The inferences or theories developed in the aboriginal context were not based on quantitative analysis of repeated observations in a controlled setting. Rather, they represented a convergence of perspectives from different vantage points, accumulated over time (Waldram, 1986). (as cited in Brant Castellano, 2000, p. 24)

A third source of knowledge in Indigenous communities is revealed knowledge. These sets of knowledges are gained through “dreams, visions, and intuitions that are understood to be

spiritual in origin” (Brant Castellano, 2000, p. 24). This source of knowledge has been used by Indigenous communities for both economic and psychological purposes. For example, as Brody’s (1983) research illustrates,

Old-timers...located their prey in dreams, found their trails, and made dream-kills. Then, a few days later, or whenever it seemed auspicious to do so, they would go out, find the trail, re-encounter the animal, and collect the kill. (as cited in Brant Castellano, 2000, p. 24)

Indigenous knowledges gained through this third source are erased in Eurocentric knowledge paradigms. Relegated to the margins, revealed knowledges are associated with spirituality and as such are disappeared in Western epistemology. What is important to note, is that primary sources of Indigenous knowledge are regularly constructed by and through European knowledge systems as inferior ways of knowing and, as such, are dismissed. As Ermine (1995) asserts, tensions between Indigenous knowledge systems and European knowledge systems are also in regard to the purpose of knowledge production. As evidenced through language and culture “Aboriginal people were attaining knowledge of a very different nature and purpose” (p. 104).

Conclusion.

It is clear that dominant Western and Indigenous assumptions about knowledge are at odds with one another. As Barnhardt (2002) maintains, these differing understandings emerge from differing epistemological orientations and often leave Aboriginal peoples experiencing cultural clashes (as cited in Marker, 2004, p. 103). Hierarchies of knowledge production serve to subjugate and block Indigenous Self-determination. Thus, arguing for the

right of Self-determination, Indigenous scholars highlight the principal right to Self-determining knowledge production. As Brant Castellano (2004) contends,

Fundamental to the exercise of self-determination is the right of peoples to construct knowledge in accordance with self-determined definitions of what is real and what is valuable. Just as colonial policies have denied Aboriginal Peoples access to their traditional lands, so also colonial definitions of truth and value have denied Aboriginal Peoples the tools to assert and implement their knowledge. (p. 102)

My intent in this chapter has been to briefly outline some of the major tensions between Western and Indigenous systems and philosophies of knowledge. I argue that who controls sites of education is important, as education determines cultural values. My thesis is organized in this way because the next chapter engages in a discussion of the ways in which epistemology can further be linked to research methodology. There are multiple connections here too: knowledge production, education and research are all tied up with one another. Amongst other Indigenous scholars, Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999) works to show how research is linked to European colonization and imperialism. Grounded in European assumptions to know all, practices of Western research are used to deny Aboriginal Peoples knowledges. Therefore, Indigenous scholars ask questions about what it means to decolonize both knowledge production and the research process. These connections I explore in the following chapter as I engage with Indigenous literature regarding both Western and Indigenous research methodologies. My hope is that this discussion will help to illuminate the ways in which differing understandings of knowledge production lead to various ways of approaching research.

Chapter 2: Decolonizing the Research Process.

*“An Elder who had opened the meeting spoke quietly from a corner of the room.
‘If we have been researched to death,’ he said,
‘maybe it’s time we started researching ourselves back to life’.”¹⁵*

Introduction: Appreciating alternative ways of knowing and doing.

Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues that research with Aboriginal Peoples has most often been linked to European colonialism and imperialism, and that practices of Western research have typically been used to deny Aboriginal Peoples’ knowledges. Consequently, it is imperative to address the ways that the colonial process has affected the production of knowledge and research, as well as the ways that efforts to decolonize knowledges and the research process can lead to the recognition and appreciation of alternative ways of knowing.

To remind readers, the task of my thesis is to explore how the *NYA WEH* educational narratives speak to questions of Aboriginal education for Self-determination. In the first chapter, I reviewed the literature on Aboriginal education, tracing the shift from earlier assimilationist strategies to the current focus on Aboriginal education for Self-determination. My purpose was to demonstrate that student dis/engagement is not just about youth leaving school early; it is a problem rooted in the history of state policies of colonialism, cultural imperialism and cultural genocide. This perspective informed how I surveyed critical understandings of Aboriginal early school leaving, and it is in this context that I situate my understandings of the research problem. The second part of the first chapter looked at Aboriginal epistemology, demonstrating the links between imperialism, education and

¹⁵ (Brant Castellano, 2004, p. 98).

knowledge production. My intention was to discuss tensions between Western and Indigenous epistemologies and the impact these varying ways of knowing have on approaches to Aboriginal education.

In this second chapter, I link questions of epistemology with research methodology. I do this work because, as Kovach (2009) identifies, “epistemology and research methodology are a tightly bound, complex partnership” (p. 55). Thus, I begin by presenting a range of ways through which Indigenous scholars conceptualize and problematize Western research methodologies. I then shift the discussion to Indigenous research methodologies, highlighting the ways in which Indigenous communities have begun to assert alternative visions of the research process. I explore the ways in which different worldviews influence research paradigms as I investigate how Indigenous social research talks back, and writes back, to colonial knowledge and research (see Kirby & McKenna, 1989). In order to recognize and appreciate alternative ways of knowing, I delve into Indigenous research as a political process aimed at Self-determination.

By exploring some of the tensions that exist between Western and Indigenous research methodologies I contextualize the research method that our team used in our research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. Therefore, I return to our research project as I bring our attention to the complex process of doing ‘good research’. I share our research team’s approach and then connect our approach to the literature on Indigenous research. Because we were conducting Aboriginal research, it was important to our team to employ an Indigenous paradigm. As such, we utilized the Wildfire Research Method (WRM), an Indigenous research method which stems from Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous research

methodology. I describe our process in order to share the journey our research team took as we engaged in Indigenous research centered in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

Connecting Western epistemologies with Western research paradigms.

Indigenous scholars have identified a range of problems with Western scientific research and positivist¹⁶ claims of objectivity and equal representation (see for example, Battiste, 2000, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Brant Castellano, 2004; Brant Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000; Deloria, 1991a; Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, Wilson, 2008). As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues, prevailing research paradigms which are centered on the scientific ethos of detachment are used to position researchers as objective and research subjects as objects, in relations which are disjointed and artificial but also hierarchical and power-laden. In resistance to this inequitable positioning, calls are being made to acknowledge the power relations at work in dominant approaches to research. The argument put forward is that there is no such thing as ‘objectivity’ and that rather, researchers have their own sets of assumptions which they bring to the work that they do. Acknowledging this, Wilson (2008) challenges positivist claims to objectivity when he writes,

There are several problems with the dominant scientific approach to Indigenous research. One of the most obvious is that researchers, no matter how objective they claim their methods and themselves to be, do bring with them their own set of biases. (p. 16)

¹⁶ Positivism is defined as “the theory... that every rationally justifiable assertion can be scientifically verified or is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and that philosophy can do no more than attest to the logical and exact use of language through which such observation or verification can be expressed (Pearsall & Trumble, 1995, p. 1130).

Indigenous analysis, then critiques Western positivism as a process of colonization.

Furthermore, this body of literature demonstrates the ways in which positivist research, developed within a Western epistemological paradigm, often serves to oppress Indigenous communities.

The earliest European research on Turtle Island stemmed from the Western positivist research paradigm and was geared to the study of “the other”. The main focus was on European notions of Indigenous primitivism and savagery. As Indigenous scholars argue, however, this approach to research has served to reduce Indigenous Peoples to the status of objects to be studied and objectified. As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) contends,

These systems for organizing, classifying and storing new knowledge and for theorizing the meanings of such discoveries, constituted research. In a colonial context, however, this research was undeniably also about power and domination. The instruments or technologies of research were also instruments of knowledge and instruments for legitimating various colonial practices. (p. 61)

Wilson (2008) also argues that Western research is linked to colonialism. As he writes,

“Eurocentric research has helped in the colonization and oppression of our people” (p. 13).

Identifying mainstream, scientific research as “one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized” (p. 7), Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues that there is a political history of “imperialism that shapes research methods” (p. 28). Positivist research methods, deeply connected to political processes, thus serve the colonial project. Consequently, Indigenous communities have come to see research as a continuation of colonial and imperial domination.

A review of the literature clearly demonstrates how historically, much of Western research served to pathologize Indigenous Peoples, their lives and their communities, and to justify paternalistic intervention in the name of ‘helping, improving or correcting’ problems

(Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery, 2004; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). This research, which has been conducted *on* Indigenous peoples, rather than *by* or *with* Indigenous Peoples, pathologizes Indigenous communities. As Wilson (2008) writes, these sets of research continue the vicious cycle of pathology by continuously identifying the need for future research on Indigenous Peoples. As he contends,

Many studies in psychology, human services and other social sciences conducted *on* Indigenous people- as opposed to those conducted *by* or *with* Indigenous people – focus on negative aspects of life, as identified by outside researchers. In many of their conclusions, the studies identify “problems” that are in need of further study (Dion, Gotowiec, and Beiser, 1998; Novins et al., 1997). The research agenda is set from outside the community. (p. 16)

Concurring that much outsider research has emerged from a “perspective of deficiency”, Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) promote Indigenous resistance to research that pathologizes Native Indigenous peoples (p. 12). However, even though greatly resisted by Indigenous communities, colonialist approaches to research continue to occur. Indigenous communities still suffer from the ill effects of dominant research stemming from Western epistemology and its unproblematized relation to the colonial project. As Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) explain, “As it is now, university research, as an arm of Western knowledge production, continues to formulate processes to better penetrate and extract Indigenous thought through the research enterprise” (p. 27). Kovach (2005) too identifies the ways in which universities work to serve the interests of the elite. As she writes, “universities became think-tanks for knowledge production culminating in research methodologies, extractive in nature which served industry and business” (p. 22). Additionally, prevailing research practices often lead to the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges. As Ermine,

Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) write, such exploitative research continues cultural imperialism (p. 26).

Observing the consequences of the history of research on Indigenous communities, Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) writes, “The term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1). Brant Castellano (2004) as well comments on the negative history of research on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, identifying the negative associations Aboriginal peoples make with research. As she assesses,

Research acquired a bad name among Aboriginal Peoples because the purposes and meanings associated with its practice by academics and government agents were usually alien to the people themselves and the outcomes were, as often as not, misguided and harmful. (p. 98)

Indigenous scholars argue that prevailing Eurocentric research is not objective but, rather, is an extension of colonial oppression. Through the study of ‘the other’, Aboriginal Peoples are pathologized while at the same time experience the exploitation of their knowledge systems. Identifying the bias built into prevailing Western research, Battiste and Henderson (2000) write “most existing research on Indigenous peoples is contaminated by Eurocentric prejudice” (p. 132). Deloria (1991a) continues to highlight the critique of non-Aboriginal positivist researchers researching Aboriginal Peoples, writing that a commitment to scientific knowledge simply furthers tensions between researchers and community members. As he explains,

Researchers working cross-culturally, in particular with Aboriginal communities, have been widely criticized for their disregard of local ethics, of issues of authority, protocols and ownership, adhering only to the conventions of scientific knowledge. (as cited in Piquemal, 2003, p. 199)

Insightfully, given this history, Sinclair (2003) identifies how he chooses to no longer engage with the word ‘research’, choosing instead “benign terms such as ‘projects’” (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 13).

It was not only Indigenous communities who resisted research emerging from positivism. Bodies of critical research developed within Western thought in resistance to prevailing Western research. These works strived to acknowledge and value alternative ways of knowing. Rejecting scientific positivism, feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-colonial studies began a shift toward qualitative research: an approach to research that has come to be valued in Indigenous communities. Reviewing the evolution of Western research, Kovach (2005) identifies three distinct research paradigms,

By the late 1970s there were at least three distinct groupings of research paradigms on the radar screen, including *empirical* (positivist), *interpretative*, and *critical* approaches (Kemmis, 2001). Of these three categories, critical research incorporated emancipatory methodologies such as feminist research and participatory research - Indigenous methodologies could fall into this category as well. (p. 22)

Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) also suggest that these alternative more critical and pluralistic Western approaches to research are much more appropriate for Indigenous research. As they write, “The more inclusive and respectful research becomes of other ways of knowing, the more applicable Western qualitative research is to Indigenous people, and Indigenous issues” (p. 15). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also comment on shifts in Western thought to qualitative research methods explaining that since the 1980s alternative research within Western thought has strived to be inclusive to “voice, worldview and culture” (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 15).

Critical research, influenced by feminist, postmodernist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial theories, although not automatically cognizant of other cosmologies, has the capacity to

appreciate multiple worldviews in ways that traditional scientific research does not. For that reason, some Indigenous scholars suggest that research that develops out of these critical paradigms can be valuable to Indigenous Peoples and communities. Methodologies such as action research and participatory action research, and methods such as qualitative interviews and focus groups can be helpful in constructing research that helps to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. As Wilson (2001) observes, Indigenous researchers have found that many of these critical research methods tend to work well within an Indigenous paradigm (p. 178). Providing the example of talking circles, Wilson determines that this method coincides with Indigenous epistemological orientations. As he explains, “That is why we have all dabbled with using talking circles (often justified by calling them focus group discussions) as a method, because it coincides with the Indigenous epistemological importance of relationships” (p. 178)¹⁷.

Nevertheless, there is still the very real concern that many research projects continue to be developed within Western epistemological paradigms. Kovach (2005) identifies one such complication when it comes to Indigenous research projects. As she notes, it is not enough to simply add the word ‘Indigenous’ to research. She concludes,

Indigenizing a Western model of research without critical reflection can result in the individualistic approach of a principal investigator determining the question, methodology, and methods and asking an Indigenous person to act as a ‘front’. (p. 26)

Consequently, Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) contend that such research does not ultimately serve Indigenous communities,

¹⁷ It is important to note that, although Wilson acknowledges that Indigenous researchers may use the language of ‘focus groups’ to describe talking circles, they are not equivalent. Rather, this naming is done as a way of gaining approval or as a way for talking circles to be understood by/within prevailing research practices. Having to language talking circles as such is not particularly pleasant for those forced to do so (J. P. Restoule, personal communication, October 2011).

The continuing attempts to formulate research that is respectful to Indigenous Peoples still conform to the fundamental Eurocentric orientation of fitting Indigenous knowledge into Western frameworks and interests. (p. 27)

Wilson (2001), too, determines that these research paradigms, although beneficial at times to Indigenous communities, are still positioned within a Eurocentric model. He argues that there is therefore now a need for Indigenous researchers to move beyond Western research paradigms to an Indigenous research paradigm. He writes,

Now as Indigenous researchers we need to move beyond these, beyond merely assuming an Indigenous perspective on these non-Indigenous paradigms. We need to go beyond this Indigenous perspective to a full Indigenous paradigm. Our ontology, epistemology, axiology, and our methodology are fundamentally different....talking about how Indigenous research needs to reflect Indigenous contexts and world views; that is, they must come from an Indigenous paradigm rather than an Indigenous perspective. (p. 176)

Critiquing scientific research practices as extensions of colonialism and imperialism, Indigenous scholars and researchers call for a new era of Indigenous research stemming from Indigenous epistemology, while continuing to selectively interact with critical non-Indigenous perspectives. In the following section, we will now look at the ways in which Indigenous scholars conceptualize a practice for decolonizing knowledge and research.

Connecting Indigenous epistemologies with Indigenous research paradigms.

There is an emerging body of Indigenous resistance literature which highlights the importance of research grounded in Indigenous worldviews, spirituality and culture. Such a shift in focus leads to ethical Indigenous research *by* and *for* Indigenous Peoples, geared to the strengthening of Self-determination. Other sets of emerging literature, however, pose problems to the terms of the literature on Indigenous knowledge and epistemology. Critics

note, for example, that the literature on Indigenous knowledge relies on binary oppositions between Indigenous and Western which they critique as essentialist (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008). Arguing against essentialist conceptualizations, Kincheloe and Steingberg (2008) write, “Our examination of indigenous knowledge attempts to enlarge the space for such dialogue, denying the assertion of many analysts that European and indigenous ways of seeing are totally antithetical to one another. These cultural and epistemological issues are complex...” (p. 143). Despite this anti-essentialist argument, the reality is that there is a body of literature by Indigenous scholars that argues for and enacts a specifically Indigenous epistemology which they consistently differentiated from the non-Indigenous: critiques of essentialism and appeals to hybridity notwithstanding. I am aware of these tensions between the literatures, and yet, am also aware that some subaltern movements engaged in political struggles for survival use, what Spivak (1984) coined, “strategic essentialism” (Grosz, 1990, p. 11). Also acknowledging the value of strategic essentialism, Kincheloe and Steingberg (2008) explain that some Indigenous Peoples have claimed essential cultural characteristics for strategic purposes (p. 144).

While it appears that non-Indigenous writers tend to be more concerned about the essentialism of a category like ‘Indigenous knowledge’ and essentialist claims to Indigenous epistemology, there is also Indigenous literature emerging that bridges Indigenous traditions and feminist critiques (see for example, Iseke-Barnes, 2003; Mayer, 2007). For the purpose of my thesis, however, I do not unpack these complexities. Rather, my preoccupation is to understand the fundamental critique that Aboriginal scholars put forward concerning dominant knowledge systems and the existence of alternative knowledge systems that can be mobilized for processes of decolonization.

As Williams and Stewart (1992) explain, “Self-determination is the principal justification and rationale for an alternative practice and methodology” (p. 5). Calling for more culturally relevant approaches to research, Indigenous scholars are calling for the deconstruction of paradigms that undermine Indigenous worldviews. As scholars contend,

...the Western positivist research paradigm is, and has always been, antithetical to Indigenous ways of coming to knowledge on many levels; theoretically, cognitively, practically, and spiritually (Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002; Lockhart & McCaskill, 1986). (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 13)

As Menzies (2001) argues, Indigenous researchers must be aware of the history of research on Indigenous communities and adapt research projects in ways that now centre Aboriginal concerns,

Underlying the contemporary relations between researchers and Indigenous peoples is a history of forced relocation, systematic discrimination, and expropriation of resources and territory. This is the legacy of colonialism. To deny the colonial legacy by not adapting our research projects to accommodate Aboriginal concerns is to participate in the colonial project itself. (p. 22)

Wilson (2008) contends, “It is time for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research to break free from the hegemony of the dominant system, into a place where we are deciding our own research agendas” (p. 17). Brant Castellano (2004) also maintains that through the representation of Aboriginal worldviews, Aboriginal research is a valuable tool for combating hegemonic power relations. As she writes,

Aboriginal peoples...are now engaged in transforming Aboriginal research into an instrument for creating and disseminating knowledge that once again authentically represents ourselves and our understanding of the world. (p. 98)

Claiming that as a matter of decolonization Indigenous research projects must address imperialism and colonialism, Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) also engages this point of view, writing,

Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices. (p. 20)

Challenging the hegemony of Western knowledge production, Tuhiwai-Smith's (1999)

Indigenous Research Agenda suggests the importance of Indigenous researchers and their

allies moving through processes of "healing, decolonization, transformation, and

mobilization" as elements of a decolonizing Indigenous methodology which focuses on survival, recovery, development and self-determination (pp. 116-117). Such methodologies

have been constructed in an effort to support the co-construction of knowledges, and in the struggle against colonial oppression. Brown and Strega (2005) also observe how

decolonizing Indigenous methodologies are emerging as legitimate ways of knowing and

doing (p. 31). Used to develop critical research, Indigenous methodological approaches work

to "situate knowledge in historical, political and cultural context" (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p.

6). Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) further argues that alternative decolonizing methodologies such as

'Indigenous research', demonstrate the "ways research can provide systematic ways of

understanding our own predicaments, of answering our own questions, and of helping us as communities to solve our problems and develop ourselves" (p. 193).

The many Indigenous researchers and scholars who work to challenge the Western research community are part of a crucial growing movement toward 'insider research'. That

is, Indigenous Peoples conducting Indigenous research in collaboration with Indigenous

Peoples (Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 13). Communities call for research "from the margins, by the margins" (see Kirby & McKenna, 1989), arguing that it is time for

Indigenous researchers to lead Indigenous research projects. As Kovach (2005) identifies,

control over research projects and knowledge production is crucial to Indigenous Self-determination. She writes,

Research, and the control of research findings, has been critical in pushing forward community-based goals of self-determination. As has been the process of taking control of education, health, and social welfare, taking control of Indigenous research has been a long, arduous struggle with Indigenous peoples acutely aware of the power politics of knowledge. (p. 23)

This shift is also discussed by Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) who observe that resistance to outsider research has generated a growing body of literature. As they explain, “Native and non-Native scholars are making recommendations and suggestions as to how research can be made more relevant and applicable to Native people (p. 13). Piquemal (2000) too reinforces the position that prevailing outsider research has ignored Aboriginal community rights to ownership of the research project. As she identifies,

By blindly following research conventions, researchers have unwittingly and unilaterally constructed the “other”....the problem arises from the fact that researchers’ ethics, rather than those of the researched, often seem to govern the relationships. Aboriginal communities often feel that they have not been consulted appropriately. (p. 49)

Scholars contend that Indigenous research projects need to be controlled by Indigenous Peoples and need to be grounded in Indigenous ‘spiritual and philosophical foundations’. As Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) further explain,

The research agenda is based upon a specific philosophical foundation, is motivated by specific political origins in colonization, and is focused on tangible, practical outcomes that will serve the Indigenous community. (p. 16)

In their aim to serve Indigenous communities, Indigenous research projects are characterized as “primarily qualitative, participatory, collaborative, and community-based

(Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 13). Commenting on the collaborative nature of Indigenous research projects, Piquemal (2003) writes,

Collaboration implies that the inquiry is a cooperative activity and a joint effort that depends on researchers and participants sharing a set of assumptions about the subject-matter, the purpose, and the process of the research. (p. 206)

And, in addition to the growing demand that Indigenous research be community controlled, and collaborative, there is also the move to promote Indigenous systems of knowledge. This new move is noted by Berg, Evans and Fuller (2007) as an important philosophical and epistemological shift (p. 402). Indigenous scholars and researchers have thus become concerned to develop Indigenous research paradigms grounded in Indigenous epistemology and worldviews (Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 14; Wilson, 2001). As Kovach (2005) claims, these methodologies are in keeping with Indigenous understandings of knowledge production. As she writes, “Indigenous methodology flows from Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology), incorporating an Indigenous theoretical perspective and using aligned methods (eg., qualitative interviews, storytelling)” (p. 22). Wilson (2008) too maintains that, ultimately, it is imperative for Indigenous research to be developed from an Indigenous paradigm. He holds,

Indigenous people have come to realize that beyond control over the topic chosen for study, the research methodology needs to incorporate their cosmology, worldview, epistemology and ethical beliefs. An Indigenous research paradigm needs to be followed through all stages of research. (p. 15)

This approach to Indigenous research is emerging as an Indigenous methodology (Kovach (2005, p. 29). Describing a research paradigm as “a set of beliefs about the world, and about gaining knowledge, that go together to guide your actions as to how you’re going to go about doing your research” Wilson (2001, p.175) illuminates that an Indigenous Research

Paradigm is grounded in an ethic of answering to ‘all your relations’. Articulating his understanding of relations of accountability in the context of research, he describes how through their research projects, researchers are fulfilling relationships with the world around them.

As a researcher, you are answering to all your relations when you are doing research. You are not answering questions of validity or reliability or making judgements of better or worse. Instead you should be fulfilling your relationships with the world around you. So your methodology has to ask different questions: rather than asking about validity or reliability, you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? ...This becomes my methodology, an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to all my relations. (Wilson, 2001, p. 177)

Scholars further argue that Indigenous research projects that promote Indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews and relations of accountability, promote Indigenous spirituality.

Recognizing and honoring Indigenous knowledges and ways of doing Wilson (2008) speaks about the relationship between research, spirituality and ceremony, As he expresses,

“Indigenous research is a ceremony and must be respected as such...Indigenous research is a life changing ceremony” (p. 60). Also speaking to the role of spirituality in Indigenous research, Leroy Little Bear (2000) utilizes the phrase “jagged world-views colliding” to identify the differences between research that stems from Western and from Indigenous epistemologies.

Energy is now being directed toward challenging the research community in order to make sure that Indigenous research projects promote Indigenous Peoples’ Self-determination and empowerment (Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 12). Epistemology shapes how researchers understand knowledge production and research methodologies. As such, it is vital that Indigenous Peoples gain control by placing their Indigenous epistemologies at the

forefront of the research process. This approach to Indigenous research projects will serve the interests of Aboriginal communities, furthering decolonization and Self-determination. In this section, I have reviewed the literature which works to build the case that in order to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities, and in order to further Aboriginal Self-determination, Indigenous research projects need to be developed from an Indigenous research paradigm grounded in Indigenous epistemology.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I turn our attention to the research project entitled *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. I describe our research methodology, detailing the steps we took as a research team as we worked to approach our research ‘in a good way’. As we moved through this process, we looked to honour Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, while giving thanks to the Creator for providing us with the opportunity to engage in this work.

Introducing “Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools” - An Indigenous research project.

As mentioned in the introduction, the research project entitled *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* is a collaborative effort between Sir John A. Macdonald and the Tecumseh Centre. During the months of May and June 2009 our research team listened to, and learned from, the shared narratives of twenty-one *NYA WEH* community members in seven separate Wildfire Gatherings¹⁸. Before beginning the research project, however, there were particular steps our team believed we must follow as we began our research journey. In keeping with Indigenous

¹⁸ An overview of the research project and the research team members is provided in the Introduction pp. 8-10.

ways, the team recognized that our first step in this journey needed to involve approaching the Elders who were connected with the *NYA WEH Program*. In maintaining our relations of accountability we knew that it was important to speak with the Elders in order to gain their consent for the project. Meeting at the school in the principal's office, our research team introduced ourselves, spoke of our intentions with this research project and presented tobacco, a sacred medicine, to the *NYA WEH Program* Elders. Our offering of tobacco was a sign of our respect and appreciation for the Elders, and in this instance, the offering was accompanied by a request for the Elders to consider our words and the research the principal had invited us into the school to do. The team and the research project were welcomed by the Elders and our journey continued. Piquemal (2000) highlights the importance of developing partnerships before seeking consent. As she writes, "To establish a partnership *before* seeking such consent... Researchers and participants must collaborate to reach an agreement regarding the nature and purpose of the research and the ways in which it should be conducted" (p. 49)¹⁹.

We had now gained both written consent from the school, as well as verbal consent from the Elders. Piquemal (2001) identifies the importance of both when seeking approval to engage in Indigenous Research. She explains,

Three years ago, I was granted both oral and written permission to study narratives, storytelling, and traditional ways of learning as they applied to a specific Native

¹⁹ The Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's (2010, Dec) 2nd edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* states that researchers are able to meet with potential participants in order to determine if community members are interested in the project and to discuss the design of the research project (Article 3.5). As identified by this article, "These preliminary conversations – which may include negotiations concerning the terms on which a researcher may engage with a particular community or group – do not in themselves constitute research, and therefore do not require consent" (para. 4). While researchers may not recruit participants or gather consent until approval from a Research Ethics Board, the TCPS (2010) also states that "REB review is not required for the initial exploratory phase, which may involve contact with individuals or communities intended to establish research partnerships or to inform the design of a research proposal" (Article 6.11 para. 1).

community in Alberta. The elders of the school involved in my research gave me oral approval; the director of the school gave me written consent. Even though the written authorization may be regarded as official, the acquisition of the elders' permission constituted the first and most important step of my research. The oral approval may be defined as cultural approval....(p. 71). (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 30)

As Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) observe, however, navigating this process can be tricky, as there are often tensions between many Research Ethics Boards (REBs), and researchers attempting to gather community consent. They write,

Because consent is a process that may have elements that need to be negotiated with a community/participants prior to 'formal' consent being granted through a Research Ethics Board, researchers and communities find themselves in a dilemma. In order to negotiate the consent process, contact with the community/participants is required; however, this is prohibited by many REBs. In order to follow an ethical path with the Indigenous community in question, the researcher may be required to violate their institutional ethics. This is an extremely problematic situation that must be redressed immediately by REBs. (p. 31)

Our next steps brought us back to the school so that we could introduce ourselves to the youth, the cultural support workers and the teachers who participate in the *NYA WEH Program*. The principal took us on a tour of the school, and then we were invited into a classroom to observe a grade nine Native Studies class. We were invited to visit at the school again and, joining the same class, we sat and listened to a community Elder who was visiting the youth to share Full Moon Teachings. Full Moon teachings are related to honouring Grand Mother Moon and the cycles of life²⁰. Although we had not begun our 'research', we were beginning to build relationships. This building of relationships is a significant aspect of Indigenous Research that might often be overlooked in Eurocentric approaches to research. The youth, the cultural support workers and the teachers were beginning to know us, but we

²⁰ Because these teachings were meant for the *NYA WEH* students, I choose to honour this by not describing these teachings further.

had yet to introduce ourselves to the larger *NYA WEH* community. Thus, it was important that before we began our research, we attend a community Feast held at the school. This was an opportunity for us to introduce ourselves to the *NYA WEH* community. Feasts and Potlucks are common among Indigenous Peoples and are often held for ceremonies and celebrations as a means for communities to come together to share food and festivities and to build positive relationships. The community Feast provided a culturally appropriate way to introduce not only ourselves, but the research project about to begin. We understood the Feast to be an opportunity for us all to come together, to build relationships, and to discuss the research project in detail. As part of our ethical commitment to transparency, we encouraged dialogue between all participating members and the research team. The Feast was opened by a community Elder, the young men, cultural support workers and our research officer then drummed, and then the members of the research team each spoke a few words. After sharing our ideas about the work we were entering into together, we all began to eat the food that had earlier been prepared by the cultural support workers and some of the youth. During this time, the research team was available to answer questions and to meet with the *NYA WEH* community members including youth, cultural support workers, parents/guardians, Elders, traditional teachers, school teachers, principal and the member of the program's funding organization Niwasa Head Start Program (Niwasa). This relationship-building step is an important element in Indigenous research and is part of the process too that distinguishes Indigenous research from much of quantitative positivist research.

Relationship-building is especially critical as it is also a way of gaining community consent. As Beauvais (1999) identifies, "Individual consent to research in and by itself is a problematic issue for Indigenous Peoples in light of the collective knowledge concept and

Indigenous social mores” (as cited in Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 30). Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) identify the nature of collective knowledge ownership in Aboriginal communities. Commenting on the importance of group consent, they maintain, “recent guidelines have gravitated towards group consent as the first stage basis for acquiring individual consent to participate in research” (p. 30). Indigenous communities contend that notions of individual consent have been developed within a Western paradigm which understands knowledge as belonging to individuals. This paradigm conflicts with Indigenous notions of collective ownership of knowledge. Thus, in honouring Indigenous understandings of collectivity, the research team first sought *NYA WEH* community consent before acquiring individual consent from those wishing to participate in the research project. Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery (2004) further elaborate the point, when they determine,

Importantly, the current privileging of the individual overlooks other cultures’ forms of social organization where individuality is less pronounced. Many Indigenous Peoples consider community consent to be as important as individual consent. (p. 31)

In speaking at the Feast to gather community consent, we followed Piquemal’s (2000) second principle for conducting research with Aboriginal communities, “to consult with the relevant authorities, which are both the individual and the collective” (p. 50). In this case, the collective included youth under the age of eighteen. In the original REB application our research team submitted we requested that Aboriginal youth over the age of fourteen be able to provide their own consent and not require parent/guardian permission. As we explained in our application, in many Aboriginal cultures it is common to encourage youth to freely express their opinions and ideas without fear of restriction. It is with this cultural imperative in mind that we requested that youth aged fourteen and above be empowered to provide informed consent on their own. Brock University’s REB, however, determined that youth

under that age of sixteen would be required to provide parental/guardian consent to participate in the research project.

A few days after the community Feast, where community consent was provided in support of the research project, our team met outside under the trees surrounding the Tecumseh Centre to participate in a sacred pipe ceremony. As Hampton (1995) writes of the pipe ceremony, “In it, the pipe is offered to the six directions; first to the one above, then to the east, then to the south, then to the west, then to the north, and then to the earth” (p. 16). Our research team came together to do this as a way of requesting permission from the Creator and giving thanks to the Creator for the work we were about to begin. It was now time for us to spend time with the young women and men who participated in the *NYA WEH Program*. Lyn Trudeau and I spent time at the school with the youth and the cultural support workers on two afternoons. As we sat together in the *NYA WEH Program* room, we began to build our relationships, speaking with youth and answering any questions they might have about the project. Our research had still not ‘begun’ and individual consent had still not been obtained, however, we were not there to do that. Our intent, rather, was to provide an opportunity for more dialogue about the project before we asked for consent. It is important for research projects involving Indigenous Peoples to allow space for this process. We left consent forms for potential participants, as well as a drop-box as a way for youth who did wish to participate in the project to do so confidentially. This was important to our team as we did not want youth to feel pressured to participate in the project. While youth had time to consider the project, we then turned our attention to focusing on what it is we wished to discuss with participants during our upcoming Wildfire Gatherings. Further to the principles she developed to help guide researchers working with Aboriginal communities, Piquemal

(2000) identifies the importance of securing true consent from participants. As she articulates, “free and informed consent is an ongoing process based on notions of authority and collectiveness, and on a principle of confirmation” (p. 49).

The following three sections are organized in the following way. First, I describe our approach to Medicine Wheel Teachings and I outline how we developed our research questions. Second, I provide a description of how our research team engaged with Indigenous Research Methodologies, specifically the Wildfire Research Method. Third, I provide a greater account of the Wildfire Gatherings that were held with *NYA WEH* community members.

Developing our research questions: Learning from Medicine Wheel teachings.

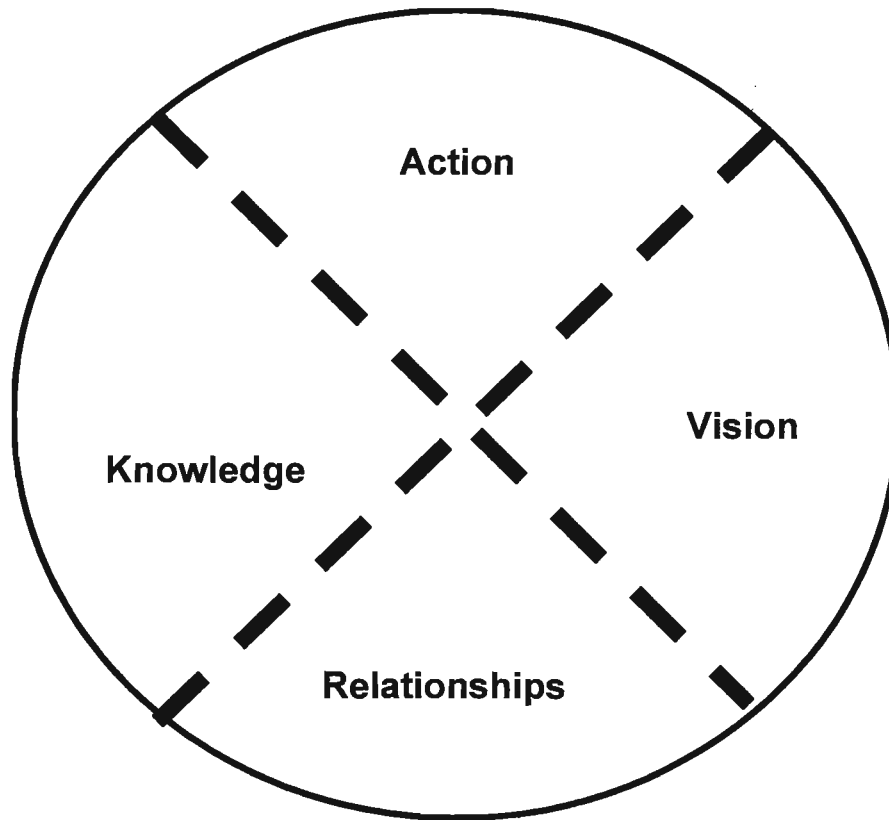
There are hundreds of documented sites across Ontario which provide historical examples of Medicine Wheel themes; they are painted (pictographs) or incised (petroglyphs) on rock formations. These circles are understood to be ancient spiritual sanctuaries where teachings, knowledges, and insights were and still are imparted in each successive generation (see Nikiforuk, 1992; Weber, 2009). And yet, the use of what has become known as Medicine Wheel Teachings has not been left to the ancient past. Contemporary educators working in Aboriginal contexts across Turtle Island are engaging with Medicine Wheel Teachings as a way of grounding research, scholarship, and teaching in an Aboriginal epistemological consciousness (Hodson, personal communication, March 2009). Describing the “interrelated multi-verse of Medicine Wheel teachings” Hodson (2004) writes,

It is best for the reader to conceive Medicine Wheel Teachings as a series of interrelated circles that, in and of themselves, form a larger circle. Each Medicine Wheel Teaching within the circle is a self-contained and comprehensive teaching that

connects and relates to the circle on either side. Each Wheel is bisected into four quadrants and it is understood that the Creator resides at the centre of those quadrants. (p. 30)

As a research team, we worked together to conceptualize our thinking about the ways in which we might organize the research questions we might ask the participants of the *NYA WEH Program*. Although we planned to approach the Wildfire Gatherings inductively, and as such there would be no way of knowing what or how participants might share with us, we did organize a set of questions we wished to address during the Wildfire Gatherings. Participants could of course, on their own, raise these ideas or we might guide the Gatherings toward a discussion around these ideas. These sets of questions which guided our discussions were organized along a particular Medicine Wheel Teaching. The *Vision Medicine Wheel*, represented below in Figure 2, teaches that for a *vision* or idea to come to fruition, the development of certain *relationships* need to be developed, and through those *relationships* the *knowledges* necessary to chart a course of *action*, will in turn make that *vision* a reality. Although the origin of the *Vision Medicine Wheel* is unclear, it is used by the Tecumseh Centre in their Aboriginal research projects. We used it in this research project to help us learn about the *NYA WEH Program* and how this program might be connected to student engagement. As such, we asked participants about their visions of education, the relationships they think need to be developed to support those visions, the knowledges they think are necessary to support the way participants envision Aboriginal education, and the actions participants believe are needed to implement their educational visions. We were interested to learn if the *NYA WEH Program* reflects and supports participant visions for education.

Figure 2. *The Vision Medicine Wheel*



Engaging with Indigenous methodologies: The Wildfire Research Method.

As the literature shows, Indigenous scholars call for culturally relevant research methodologies. Wilson (2008), for example, encourages strategies that place cultural considerations in the forefront of research projects (as cited in Barnhardt, 2008, p. 170). In our research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* we utilize the Wildfire Research Method (WRM), an

Indigenous methodology, for the opportunities it created in co-constructing and re-discovering knowledges (see Kompf & Hodson, 2000). In order to learn from educational narratives of youth and the people who participate in their education, we engage in this qualitative Indigenous research method because it “provides a communal and sacred research space that reflects the traditional beliefs of many Aboriginal People” (Cherubini, Hodson, McGean, Trudeau & Harrison, 2009, p. 5). We utilized this approach in order to nurture a holistic relationship between theory and practice and because it implicitly acknowledges the value of Indigenous theory and method. Qualitative methods are commonly utilized when working with Aboriginal communities “because qualitative research frameworks provide ‘congruence and cultural safety’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) for the tenets of an Indigenous worldview” (Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004, p. 14).

The WRM stems from an Indigenous methodological approach to research (Kompf & Hodson, 2000). It is compatible with Indigenous methodologies and traditions and is used in this project in order to learn from the educational narratives of Aboriginal community members. Similar to talking-circles, discussions are led by a facilitator and participants are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings. Our research team met with community members who shared their educational stories / narratives. Of storytelling and narrative, Wilson (2001) comments

Storytelling and methods like personal narrative also fit the epistemology because when you are relating a personal narrative, you are getting into a relationship with someone. You are telling your (and their) side of the story and you are analyzing it. When you look at the relationship that develops between the person telling the story and the person listening to the story, it becomes a strong relationship. (p. 178)

Based on the principles of Indigenous research methodologies, the WRM is a holistic means of information gathering. The WRM is a method that reflects Aboriginal cultural

norms and which attempts to remove barriers to research involving Aboriginal Peoples. A relational method, the core of the WRM is its attention to researchers and research participants. Placing primacy on relationships, the WRM is centered on an epistemological orientation toward an ethic of care. By focusing on the multiplicity of relationships between the research community and the *NYA WEH* community we worked to develop respectful partnerships. In the WRM researchers operate as facilitators, guiding and co-constructing with research participants, the co-construction of an understanding of knowledges. As Torre and Fine (2006, p. 458) describe, this approach to research starts with “the understanding that people – especially those who have experienced historic oppression- hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences” (as cited in Cahill, Sultana & Pain, 2007, p. 309). By questioning and challenging ‘expert knowledge’, research participants and communities gain confidence in their own knowledge base as they work to reclaim culture and heritage and build Self-determining communities.

The WRM mirrors Aboriginal traditions, traditions that include a process of sharing and community-wide consultation. We honour these traditions through the involvement of the whole *NYA WEH* community in their participation in narrating experiences and in the process of community knowledge production. The guiding thought behind the WRM is that this process will illuminate the educational experiences of Aboriginal youth and those who participate in their education. The experience is also especially important for Aboriginal participants who see their cultural norms embedded and respected in a research study and their thoughts and feelings heard, many for the first time. Thus, we hope that through this process the Aboriginal communities consulted here can move away from being the subjects of research to being partners and active participants in the research process.

The Wildfire Gatherings: Learning from the NYA WEH community.

As outlined in the introduction, ultimately, our research team met with, listened to, and learned from twenty-one different members of the *NYA WEH* community. The Wildfire Gatherings began by inviting participants into the room where we met. This room was at the high school, just down the hall from the *NYA WEH Program* room. We were interested in holding the Gatherings at this location because we believed that if at any point participants wished to leave the Gathering, it would be important for us to be near the *NYA WEH Program* room. Participants were invited to join the circle, entering through the Eastern door and sitting in any of the open seats. The team had positioned themselves at various doorways (Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern) throughout the circle²¹. Each Gathering began in the same way, with a smudge ceremony, followed by giving thanks, discussing the process of a Wildfire Gathering, answering any questions and then turning on the audio recorders for the recorded portion of the Gatherings. These audio recordings were later transcribed and analyzed by the research team.

The Gatherings with the women were held on a Monday, one in the morning for the grades 9 and 10 women and a second Gathering in the afternoon for the women in grades 11 and 12. The team chose to organize the Gatherings in this way because we believed youth may have felt more comfortable speaking with youth of a similar age. It was also determined, because there were few women who participated in the Gatherings that Dr. Cherubini would not participate in the Gathering. The research team made this decision based on Dr.

²¹ Hampton (1995) discusses the importance of directions. As he writes, “each direction reminds me of a complex set of meanings, feelings, relationships, and movements” (p. 16). Orienting ourselves in this fashion was a way for our research team to remain grounded in an Indigenous paradigm that recognized the significance of doorways. While we acknowledged that there are various teachings about the directions, our team honoured an emergent understanding based on Medicine Wheel teachings.

Cherubini's social location as a white, 40 year old male. This was the only Wildfire Gathering for which all members of the research team were not present. The team returned to the school later that week on Friday. At that time we met with the young men who participated in the *NYA WEH Program*. Rather than holding two Wildfire Gatherings that day, however, the young men chose to come together rather than being separated by grade level. A week and a half later, the team returned again to hold the Wildfire Gathering with the teachers in the morning, and then the cultural support workers in the afternoon. Almost two weeks after this, the team returned once again to the school for a morning Wildfire Gathering with the administrators. For this Wildfire Gathering, we met in the principal's office. Later that day, the team went for lunch with the *NYA WEH Program* Elder in Residence, and then returned to the school to hold our final Wildfire Gathering with the Elder.

Drawing on their diverse experiences, these groups provided the research team with the opportunity to develop holistic understandings of the *NYA WEH Program* from each of the participants' unique perspectives. In so doing, participants offered insight into the underlying and contributing factors related to 'successful' Aboriginal education in publicly funded schools. Moreover, these rich narratives revealed new theory and practical guidance to educators working in Aboriginal learning contexts.

Analyzing the narratives.

The WRM allowed our research team to see the *NYA WEH Program* through the perspectives of participants. Participants were free to discuss whatever they wanted in a manner they felt most comfortable. This approach to our research project provided rich detail

and explanation about the *NYA WEH Program*. All together, the Wildfire Gatherings generated fifteen hours of audio recordings which were then transcribed. From the transcripts, the research team engaged in a qualitative content analysis of the educational narratives. Our research team worked together over the summer of 2009 to form our analysis of the *NYA WEH Program* educational narratives.

We analyzed the transcriptions of the narratives and then grouped them thematically. Our analysis emerged from our continuous reflections on the data. We then inductively derived theory. As Neuman and Robson explain, the purpose “is to build theory that is faithful to the data” (2009, p. 30). Our intention was to build the theory from the ground up. We started with observation, then refined our concepts, developed empirical generalizations, and identified preliminary relationships (Neuman & Robson, 2009, p. 30). Neuman and Robson (2009) further explain that researchers operating from an inductive theory approach “build ideas and theoretical generalizations based on closely examining and creatively thinking about the data” (p. 30). We started by meeting in the boardroom. Each researcher would take up the ‘role’ of a participant, as we read out loud the narratives. We read a few pages at a time, and then went back to code what we had just read. We started with open coding, as the themes of the data emerged. As Newman and Robson (2009) identify, at this stage of the analysis, “the themes are at a low level of abstraction” (p. 338). Once we had developed our understandings of the overall substance of the narratives, we found that the *NYA WEH* community members shared a range of discussion. Particular themes emerged, which all members of the *NYA WEH* community talked about and felt were important including common preoccupations, observations and assessments. The research team’s analysis determined that the main themes that emerged from the *NYA WEH* narratives could

be clustered under four concepts: Identity, Negotiating Conflicts, Community, and Healing and Wellness. Once these concepts were identified, and grouped, a document coding book was produced.

As I moved forward with my own analysis of the *NYA WEH* narratives, I again worked with the audio recordings, the transcripts and the coding binder as I began a second pass through the data, what Neuman and Robson (2009) identify as axial coding (p. 339). As I developed the analysis I put forward in this thesis I looked to connect links between the core themes that I saw repeating in multiple, intersecting ways. From this position, it was evident to me that a story was beginning to emerge. Neuman and Robson (2009) explain the process of moving from codes to core themes,

As a researcher consolidates codes and locates evidence, he or she finds evidence in many places for core themes and builds a dense web of support for them in the qualitative data ...the connection between a theme and data is strengthened by multiple instances of empirical evidence. (p. 339)

Grounded by the previous two levels of analysis, my analysis now emerges at a third level of coding which Newman and Robson (2009) identify as selective coding (p. 339). As they explain, selective coding involves “scanning data and previous codes and determining a core category around which the remaining categories all fit” (p.339). The themes that I eventually arrived at and which I take up in this thesis are (1) Native Studies curriculum, (2) relationships, and (3) culture and tradition.

Referencing the transcripts.

In total, our research team facilitated seven separate Wildfire Gatherings with the *NYA WEH Program* community. The audio recordings of these Gatherings were transcribed

by research team member Sarah McGean. This transcription work produced seven separate transcripts. For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to organize my referencing of the *NYA WEH* transcripts in the following manner. When referencing speakers, I utilize the method (cultural support worker2, p. 15, 1234-1254). This referencing identifies a quotation from cultural support worker #2, on page 15, transcription lines 1234 to 1254. This example might also be expressed in the following way: cultural support worker2 “quotation” (p. 15, 1234-1254). This particular referencing system I have developed is applied to all of the transcripts.

Furthermore, although there were seven Wildfire Gatherings, I have collapsed the two Wildfire Gatherings with the young women students into one. The Gathering with the junior women (grades 9 and 10) and the Gathering with the senior women (grades 11 and 12) have been merged into one Gathering for two reasons. First, only two junior women and three senior women participated in the Wildfire Gatherings. I think, therefore, that by referencing these two Gatherings as one there is a greater chance of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; I do this by referencing both the junior and senior women as ‘young women’. It is only in chapter 5, when I discuss the differences between the narratives of the junior women and the senior women, that I make a distinction between the young women. When this occurs, however, I simply identify the differences between the groups. I do not identify which young woman was from which Wildfire Gathering. Again, I organize my referencing in this manner due to concerns about confidentiality.

My second reason for collapsing these two Wildfire Gatherings into one comes from the learnings of our Wildfire Gathering with the young men at the school. Although our research team had organized to facilitate two separate Gatherings with the young men (one

Gathering with the junior men and another with the senior men), these young men determined that they wished for only one Wildfire Gathering. Thus, the junior and senior young men participated together in one Gathering. Following this cue, I, therefore, reference the *NYA WEH* students in the following way:

- The junior and senior women students are referenced as young women
- The junior and senior men students will be referenced as young men

In particular instances where I think it is better to not identify which particular person spoke, I move back a level to identify simply the Wildfire Gathering from which the quotation emerged. For example, the following reference (teachers, p. 5, 354-398) indicates a quotation from one of the two teachers. I find that this referencing, too, is necessary to try and maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Due to the limited number of participants, however, for example we only met with two teachers, confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed in this research project. All participants were made aware of this limitation and agreed to participate under these conditions²².

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to refer to the research team as a whole. Therefore, rather than differentiate between research members, as I reference the transcripts I identify our questioning as a process engaged in by the whole team. I purposefully do not distinguish between which members of the research team asked which question. I do this because as a research team we worked to engage holistically with our research methodology: we all participated in the planning of the themes we wished to explore before we met with

²² Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, REB File # 08-275, Brock University, indicates “the name of the school will not be confidential, nor will the *NYA WEH Program*. However, none of the youth participants who participate in the Wildfire Gatherings will be named in the research project...However, because there are few teachers, administrators, and counsellors [cultural support workers] involved in the *NYA WEH Program*, confidentiality and anonymity may be difficult to maintain. Each participant is aware of this potential issue and will have the opportunity to not participate if they so choose” (Section E, 22, confidentiality and anonymity).

participants for the Wildfire Gatherings. I, therefore, reference all research team member quotations in the following way (research team, p. 4, 346-364). It is important to note, however, that the team member who took the lead in facilitating the Wildfire Gatherings was Dr. Hodson.

A modification to the above system was developed in order to reflect two particular occasions. I had the opportunity to return to Sir John A. Macdonald in order to present my thesis findings to the Native Studies teacher (one of the teachers who participated in a Wildfire Gathering) and one of the cultural support workers (this individual also participated in a Wildfire Gathering). I appreciate the feedback and suggestions I received from them during our visits and, in places where I include their input, I clearly identify that this information was shared with me directly and not during the Wildfire Gatherings. For example, I reference my visit with the Native Arts teacher in the following manner (Native Arts teacher, personal communication, September 2010, p. 3)²³. Because this teacher also participated in the Wildfire Gatherings, and in order to maintain anonymity beyond this particular check-in visit, I reference her quotations from the Wildfire Gathering in the following way (teacher, p. 3, 98-120). On a final note, the cultural support worker I met with is also the *NYA WEH Program* drum instructor. Thus, when I reference his feedback to my fifth chapter, I utilize the following referencing system (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011)²⁴. I make this distinction in order to mark the significance of his having reviewed the chapter of the thesis which focuses on women and the Big Drum. I utilize the same process for the cultural support worker as he, too,

²³ The Native Arts teacher provided verbal consent for this modification.

²⁴ The cultural support worker/drum instructor provided verbal consent for this modification. He also reviewed the bridging segment *Continuing Relations of Accountability* which was developed based on his review of chapter 5. At this time, he provided written consent for the way in which he was identified.

participated in the Wildfire Gatherings. To maintain anonymity beyond the check-in visit I had with him, I reference his quotations from the Wildfire Gathering in the following way (cultural support worker, p. 4, 156-170). Figure 1 the *NYA WEH Program Wildfire Gathering Schedule* (Introduction, p. 13) clarifies this process.

Community accountability.

Accountability to our participants is another important ethical concern for our research team. Deloria (1991a) comments on the history of researcher lack of accountability in regard to research findings. As he notes, “My original complaint against researchers was that they seem to derive all the benefits and bear no responsibility for the way in which their findings are used (p. 457). We were conscious of our relations of accountability and thus developed the following community accountability plan. First, once the audio recordings were transcribed, we provided participants with a copy of their own transcript. This was done in order to confirm on-going consent to participate. Participants were provided with a copy of only their words and were invited to erase, modify or add to their contribution as they wished. After we had completed our analysis of the *NYA WEH* narratives, we then put together a draft document which outlined the research team’s preliminary findings from the research project.

In December 2009, the *NYA WEH Program* held a second community Feast at the high school. Our research team was invited back to the school and it was at this Feast that we verbally ‘reported back’ to participants, sharing key themes from the narratives as we had heard them. We also presented to the *NYA WEH Program*, and the funding organization Niwasa, copies of our preliminary research report entitled *Reaching back to our*

Ancestors...Guiding the futures of our youth: Preliminary Research Report on the NYA WEH Program at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, Hamilton Ontario (Nov 2009). This preliminary report was provided to the *NYA WEH Program* community as an opportunity for our research team to continue to learn from community input, as well as an opportunity for us to incorporate community input into the final report. In this way, we followed Piquemal's (2000) third principle guiding research with Aboriginal Peoples, "to continually confirm consent to ensure that consent is ongoing" (p. 51). Providing the community and funders with the preliminary report also ensured we followed Piquemal's (2000) fourth principle, to provide data to community prior to final report. As she writes, doing research in a 'good way' means that researchers must,

Be able to provide the participants with the data prior to completion of the final report. The participants must be given all the information and data that might be useful or beneficial to them. Consent for research means that the researcher has a responsibility to the participants not only through the research process, but also after the research has been completed. It is important that the participants give their consent to the way in which the research results are being used and disseminated. (p. 51)

In addition, we presented the *NYA WEH Program* with a gift; a poster which was created to provide a visual representation of the findings from our research project. This artwork, entitled *The Aboriginal Students' Song*, was developed from our research project and has been hung in the office of Sir John A. Macdonald. Based on the *Vision Medicine Wheel*²⁵, the text in this poster reads:

²⁵ The *Vision Medicine Wheel* is described on p. 73.

Reaching back to our Ancestors...Guiding the futures of our Youth

Vision: Emergent / new vision of self rooted in cultural pride. Create opportunities for scholastic pathways. "I want to understand more."

Relationships: Meaningful interactions and connections with others. Creates a safe environment and learning resource. "You have someone who cares."

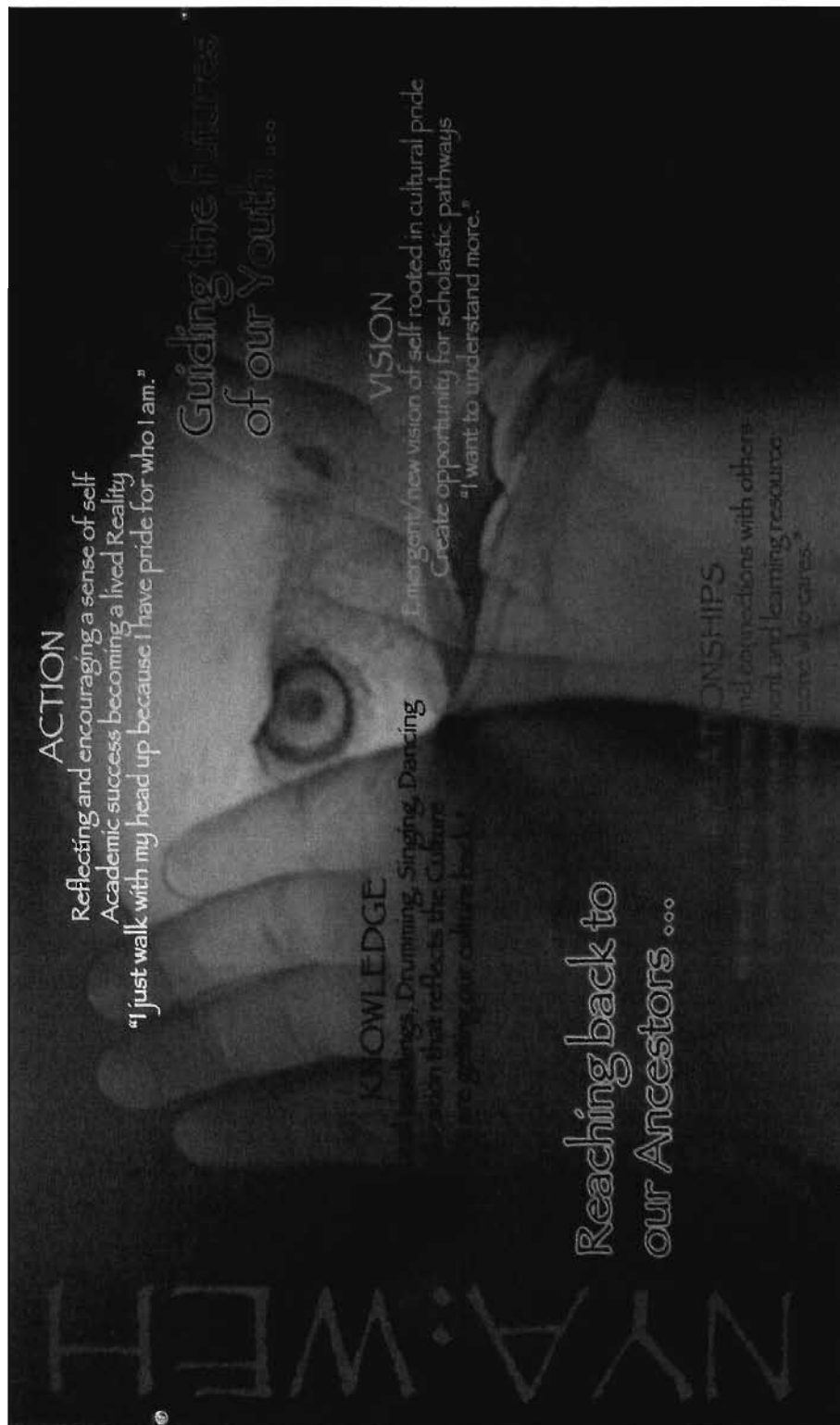
Knowledge: Traditional teachings, Drumming, Singing, Dancing. Education that reflects the culture. "We are getting our culture back."

Action: Reflecting and encouraging a sense of self. Academic success becoming a lived reality. "I just walk with my head up because I have pride for who I am."

Please see Figure 3, below, a photograph of this gift.

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Figure 3. *The Aboriginal Students' Song* (2009)²⁶.



²⁶ Lyn Trudeau, graphic artist at the Tecumseh Centre designed this lovely poster.

Finally, a honourarium of \$1000 was presented to the *NYA WEH Program*. Deloria (1991) acknowledges the importance of providing honouraria as a way of giving back to the community, arguing that “scholars should be required to put something back into the Indian community, preferably some form of financial support so the community can do a few things it wants to” (p. 457). It was decided that rather than provide each individual participant with an honourarium, the *NYA WEH Program* as a whole would receive the honouraria. In this way, all community members would benefit from the research project. In addition to financial benefit, communities should also benefit from the work in some way. As Indigenous scholars have observed, frequently research benefits individual researchers but not the community being studied (Williams & Stewart, 1992, Abstract). Our hope was that this research project might serve to aid in meeting and supporting community needs by raising awareness of the good work that is happening in the *NYA WEH Program*.

It is also our team’s commitment to share the *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* project through papers, presentations and by attending conferences. I took the lead in developing our team’s first research paper entitled *NYA WEH: Learning from educational narratives*. In May 2009, Lyn Trudeau, Lorenzo Cherubini and I presented this paper at the 2009 Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) Conference. Our focus was to speak about our research methodology. As well, in the summer of 2009, Lyn Trudeau and I presented a paper at the Niagara District School Board 2009 Conference. Our focus was to share the perspectives of the young women who participated in the *NYA WEH Program*. As the research team moves forward, and individual researchers write about the project, we have all committed to

continue to share our work and ensure that copies are provided to the *NYA WEH* community and to the funding agency, Niwasa.

With regard to accountability, in addition to the above mentioned processes, I also met with two members of the *NYA WEH* community in order to clarify and confirm the content of my draft analysis chapters. I verbally shared chapter three with the Native Studies teacher, and the cultural support worker/drum instructor provided his feedback on the fifth chapter. As well, my thesis committee members and I plan to return to Sir John A. Macdonald in the Fall of 2011 in order to present my findings at a *NYA WEH* community Feast. At that time, I look forward to sharing final copies of my thesis with the *NYA WEH* community and with Niwasa. My community of accountability is the participants: students, cultural support workers, Elder in the program as well as the teachers and principal. I am thus grateful for these opportunities and recognize that they provide a means of acknowledging and respecting the on-going nature of accountability. A copy of this thesis will also be provided to Dr. Cherubini, who, as the lead researcher for the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada²⁷.

²⁷ Adding to the complexity of relations of accountability, however, is the reality that, like all communities, there is stratification within and between Indigenous communities. As such, in attempting to be 'accountable' I was aware of the likelihood of coming up against those internal conflicts. Relations of accountability, thus, are complex and must be carefully navigated in order to honour all the voices within communities. I acknowledge that relations of accountability may be problematic when within Indigenous communities different opinions and perspectives exist. I believe that the choices I have made regarding accountability take into consideration the possibility for multiple and conflicting perspectives.

Conclusion.

Indigenous People are engaged in facilitating Indigenous research projects based on Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews which promote Indigenous knowledge systems and Indigenous research methodologies. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues the importance of Indigenous research involving sharing and reciprocity. As she argues, research should not be about Western researchers leaving with no benefit to the community being researched. Rather, Indigenous research requires a long-term commitment because the political work is to decolonize the production of both knowledge and research.

In this second chapter, I engaged in a discussion of the ways in which epistemology underpins research methodology in order to illuminate the ways in which differing epistemologies lead to different approaches to research. Specifically, I have reviewed the literature which works to build the case that in order to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities, and in order to further Aboriginal Self-determination, Indigenous research projects need to be developed from an Indigenous research paradigm grounded in Indigenous epistemology. I also provided a thick description of *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*, the collaborative research project that studied the *NYA WEH Program* and our approach to organizing and interpreting the narratives. Cognizant of responsibilities, and these relationships, in the following chapters I further think through the *NYA WEH* educational narratives. I delve into further investigation of the *NYA WEH Program* through the use of three themes (1) Native Studies curriculum, (2) relationships, and (3) culture and tradition.

Chapter 3:
***Introducing the NYA WEH Room and the First Key Element of the NYA WEH Program –
Native Studies Curriculum***

“This isn’t something that the board designed and cookie cut and plopped in and you’re expected to send your kids there.”²⁸

Introduction: By the kids, for the kids²⁹.

The first two chapters were focused on developing the relationship between education, knowledge and research. I worked to build the argument that social institutions, such as the public school system, serve dominating knowledges. I also worked to show the ways in which much prevailing western research serves to support dominating knowledges. Literature reviews of aboriginal education, Western epistemology and research, and Indigenous epistemology and research provided a background for introducing *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*, the research project that studied the educational narratives of those who participate in the *NYA WEH Program*.

From this third chapter on, I move from the research project to my own analysis of the *NYA WEH* narratives. My analysis is organized around three core themes and unfolds in three chapters. I start with a description of the Native Studies courses offered at this school and discuss what I understand to be one of the three key elements of the *NYA WEH Program*– Native Studies curriculum. Then, in the fourth chapter, I consider in detail the second key element of the program - the relationships that connect the *NYA WEH Program*. The fifth chapter is dedicated to an examination of culture and tradition.

²⁸ (administrator1, p. 13, 831-837).

²⁹ (administrator1, p. 32, 2187-2190).

To begin this third chapter, I first identify how I moved from the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools* to my analysis as I describe the story I heard as I worked closely with the *NYA WEH* educational narratives. From here, I describe the *NYA WEH Program* origins and then, with an eye to the physicality of the space around which the program is centered, I provide a description of the material context of the *NYA WEH* room. Following this, I present the Native Studies curriculum of the *NYA WEH Program*. Throughout these following chapters, I place literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination alongside the narratives of Aboriginal youth and their supporting community. My purpose in so doing is to determine how to create meaningful education for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. I would, again, like to acknowledge my gratitude to the *NYA WEH* community for trusting me to work through their narratives in a way that will hopefully help to serve not only this community, but other Aboriginal communities who are involved in publicly funded education in Ontario and perhaps across Canada or beyond.

Hearing a story: Moving from research project to thesis.

In keeping with Indigenous perspectives on knowledge production, I understand participants to be experts on their own lives and experiences. As such, I bring that expertise to bear on my interpretation of the *NYA WEH* narratives. In addition, I bring literature that calls for Aboriginal education for Self-determination into conversation with the *NYA WEH* narratives in order to hear, learn from, and guide my analysis and understandings of the educational narratives of Aboriginal community members participating in the *NYA WEH Program*. As I focus on what is working at this school to engage Aboriginal youth, I try to

understand the critical issue of student dis/engagement from an alternative perspective than how this issue is commonly approached.

It is from the *NYA WEH* transcriptions and audio recordings which emerged from the Wildfire Gatherings, and from my participation in all stages of the research process, that I now work throughout the rest of this thesis to sort through my readings of the *NYA WEH* experience. To remind readers, through seven separate Wildfire Gatherings, the research team met with twenty-one participants, all of whom were members of the *NYA WEH* community. We learned from the voices of two Aboriginal women in grades 9 and 10, three Aboriginal women in grades 11 and 12, seven Aboriginal men in grades 9, 10, 11 and 12, three cultural support workers, two school teachers, two school administrators, and one *NYA WEH Program* Elder in Residence. During the Wildfire Gatherings our research team asked participants about their visions of education, the relationships they think need to be developed to support those visions, the knowledges they think are necessary to support Aboriginal education, and the actions participants believe are needed to implement their educational visions.

I do not suggest that all research team members have come to the same conclusions or have even heard this story the same way that I have heard it. I, therefore, acknowledge my social location as I engage this rich body of data. With the permission of participants, the *NYA WEH* narratives are the basis of my thesis research. Informed by content analysis while also bringing my own questions, what I considered as I work through the narratives is ‘what are the ‘somethings’ that are going on here’? Why at this school, unlike other public schools across Ontario, are there such high levels of Aboriginal student engagement? My work in this thesis is to provide a detailed description of what I gleaned from these narratives and to try

and order my analysis in a way that helps readers to come to know, in some way, some aspects of the *NYA WEH* experience. I purposefully present my thesis in this fashion to acknowledge the multiple readings and understandings that are able to come from the *NYA WEH Program* narratives.

In reading the narratives, I was guided by my research questions as I searched for recurring themes. I wanted to be careful to not abstract prematurely, to allow themes to emerge and to let the narratives speak for themselves. My goal was to ground my analysis in the actual encounter and in participants' own words and to let themes and problematics come forward from the readings of these texts. As such, I worked to interpret the *NYA WEH* narratives through qualitative content analysis; I analyzed the transcriptions of the narratives and then grouped them thematically. This, then, is one story of the *NYA WEH Program* that I can tell which helps me to keep the focus on the narratives rather than have the analysis driven by, or starting with theory.

As I ran by the lake in my home town with my dog Sage, as I strolled the downtown streets with my father and as I walked by the beach with my neighbours, this is the story that I heard myself sharing with them and which I will try to share in this thesis³⁰. From this story, which is grouped around three key themes, Native Studies curriculum, relationships, and culture and tradition, the analysis emerges. I have strived to pay attention to the voices of different groups, to what each group was sharing; to dwell, marinate and ruminate in my encounter with the *NYA WEH Program* narratives. As I listened with my research questions in mind, I continued to try and understand what was going on at this school. My task, then, was to try to identify and articulate what those things were. And so, this is a story I can tell, anchored in the words of the narratives.

³⁰ During these sharings, confidentiality was maintained.

*Four students, a hotplate and a microwave*³¹.

To support Aboriginal student engagement, it is useful to look toward successful educational programming and cultural support services that currently exist in Ontario. One such site of educational change is Sir John A. Macdonald. The uniqueness of this school is its wide range of programming specifically developed to meet the needs of Aboriginal youth; strategies including the *NYA WEH Program*. Designed as a cultural support program for Aboriginal youth³², the *NYA WEH Program* combines Western education with Aboriginal cultural teachings and ceremony (Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, mission statement, n.d). Importantly, this program was developed from the bottom up and grew out of the needs of the Aboriginal community in Hamilton. Funded by Hamilton Community Foundation, collaboratively constructed in partnership with Hamilton Executive Directors Aboriginal Coalition (HEDAC) and sponsored by Niwasa, the *NYA WEH Program* is a targeted cultural support program available to Aboriginal youth who attend Sir John A. Macdonald.

It all started in 2003 with a vision and a private family donation of \$200 000. Knowing only that they wanted to fund an Aboriginal specific project, the donor family approached HEDAC (a gathering of all the Executive Directors of Aboriginal organizations in Hamilton) in order to acquire advice from Hamilton's Aboriginal community. Based on earlier HEDAC research, Aboriginal youth staying in school was prioritized as an important Aboriginal project requiring funding. Working together, HEDAC and the donor family then conceptualized the *NYA WEH Program*, an idea which they then took to the HWDSB. The

³¹ (administrators, p. 4, 219-223).

³² The HWDSB identifies that the *NYA WEH Program* supports "status, non-status, Métis and Inuit students – determined by the federal government of Canada's Indian Act- in secondary education in the Hamilton area" (*NYA WEH Program* brochure, www.hwdsb.on.ca).

HWDSB suggested that HEDAC approach Sir John A. Macdonald, a secondary school located in the centre of downtown Hamilton. This school has a population of approximately 1200 students, from over 80 countries, speaking more than 40 languages. Notable to this school is the sizable Aboriginal student population of approximately 120 young Aboriginal women and men. Relationships quickly began to form as the principal of Sir John A. Macdonald jumped on board with the *NYA WEH* concept. He, too, was aware of the exceptionally high levels of early school leaving in this community and was interested in supporting Aboriginal student engagement. It was determined that the program would be designed to create “A culturally sensitive environment for Aboriginal students to access academic, personal and community support” (Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, n.d). And, as school records show, since the inception of the *NYA WEH Program*, student engagement and graduation rates at this school are much higher than in many other secondary schools across the province.

A founding member of the *NYA WEH Program* comments on how Hamilton’s Aboriginal community pulled together, using their expertise to make the project come to fruition. As she shares,

Everybody would basically back up this project as a mentor, as a volunteer role to see it get off the ground and we had a very strong I guess human resources pool. We had people with qualifications as a lawyer, business background, teaching background and everything in between. (administrators, p. 2, 132-147)

Relationship building began with ‘champions’ such as the Superintendent of HWDSB, the principal of Sir John A. Macdonald, and Hamilton’s Aboriginal community. One of the first decisions was that nearly 100% of the funds available to support the *NYA WEH Program* would be allocated to hiring a cultural support worker. Although everyone knew that, beyond

the start-up donation, resources would be scarce, it was understood by those involved in developing the *NYA WEH Program* that the cultural support worker position was the most important to secure. As the principal and administrator share, the program started off with “four students, a hotplate and a microwave, and a lot of passion and a very green and enthusiastic cultural support worker” (administrators, p. 4, 219-223).

The principal shares, too, that it was quickly identified that there was a need for a physical space in the school to accommodate the program. A classroom on the second floor of the high school was thus converted into the *NYA WEH* room, a space the principal describes as a cultural resource room (administrators, p. 4, 235-244). When I first entered the *NYA WEH* room, in the winter of 2009, I found a comfortable room lined with windows. Desks were pulled up together in the middle of the room, facing into each other like a community of desks. As my eyes made their way along the left side of the room, I noted fully equipped computers and a telephone, all made available to students throughout the day. At the back of the room, there were three desks, one for each of the cultural support workers, and above these desks were windows which allowed the sunlight to stream into the room, illuminating a multitude of Indigenous artwork created by the students. As my gaze continued to the right, I observed a sitting area with little couches, and then, along the right side of the room was a kitchen area equipped with a stove, fridge, and sink. It is from here that food is served to the youth at lunch time and where food is prepared for community Feasts. There is also a walk-in closet with clothing available to youth; not just a box of old clothing, but a closet with clothes hung up respectfully on hangers. And that is what I felt when I was in the *NYA WEH* room, an atmosphere of respect. Throughout this warm, welcoming, respectful space, I saw youth scattered about; some talking with each other, some

working on school assignment, others on the computers, or talking to the cultural support workers and the *NYA WEH Program's* Elder in Residence. And it is here, in this space, where the basic needs of the Aboriginal students who attend this school are being met.

Aboriginal youth are fed, clothed, and provided with bus tickets which are passed out two at a time at the end of each day. In this safe space, it is clear to see that food, transportation and clothing are fundamental to the program. Without meeting these physical needs, the emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs of the youth can not adequately be met. As cultural support worker¹ tells us, monthly the program spends \$2 000 on food, and \$2 000 - \$2 500 on bus tickets. This is done in order to combat the economic barriers that prevent many Aboriginal students from coming to school. Expressing the great need for such supports, cultural support worker¹ explains the importance of providing nutrition programs to youth in the program. As he tells us,

[Students] can come to school and get a meal; they can get back and forth from school. We have had to put locks on our fridge because kids are taking stuff. And I know they need it, but we need it too at the school. So how do you combat poverty? I don't know. That is not an easy question to answer, but it is a state that a lot, a majority of Aboriginal people, are living in. And unfortunately, the school plays a lesser role when you don't have food in your fridge or you don't have a way to get to and from school and just the embarrassment of it. You know, not having clean clothes or hygiene or all of those things. Those are all barriers that prevent our kids from coming to school. We try our best to combat those things. Are they still living in these areas, yes they are. But hopefully with our program they can see what is out there, they can see that they don't have to just settle and just exist, they can do more. They can come out of that poverty. They can come out of that. (p. 14, 953-986)

Meeting these foundational needs is noticed and greatly appreciated by the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*. One of the young men we met with shares his gratitude for food and transportation support (young man³). Another young man also shares his awareness of the importance of food and transportation. As he says,

Well, they take care of lunch, like he said, and they also pay for our transportation to and from school everyday. ‘Cause a lot of people live far, so when they get up they don’t want to actually have to walk to school. So they have bus tickets, and it is easier to get to and from school. (young man6, p. 21, 1389-1397)

Other material needs such as bristol board, markers and glue are also provided in the *NYA WEH* room. As young man6 shares, he utilizes the *NYA WEH* room as a space to work on school assignments,

I have a hard time sitting in a classroom with a bunch of people, ‘cause they always talk. So I go down there and I get my work done. I have computer access, I have books, dictionaries. I have everything I need right there to do a project, a collage, anything. (p. 17, 1168-1175)

The young women we met with also share how happy they are that materials are available to them through the program - they had just completed making their own regalia from fabric that the *NYA WEH Program* purchased for them (p. 6, 412-432). Through the program, youth are provided with all that is needed to complete school assignments, including guidance and support from the cultural support workers. Another youth comments on his appreciation of the help that is available through the *NYA WEH* room. As he comments,

They also help us with our work, and we can stay after school and do homework and they will help us do our research. We have all kinds of books to help too, and stuff like that. (young man6, p. 21, 1406-1410)

The other young men with whom we met with also shared their appreciation for the space. Young man3 voices, for example, “I find that it is extremely nice that they serve food most of the time and that there is a place to go if you need any help with anything and stuff, it’s really good” (p. 10, 689-693). Many of the youth in the *NYA WEH Program* experience home life differently from what middle-class white youth in Canada might experience.

Putting lived realities into perspective, one of the teachers explains how the material support provided to the *NYA WEH* youth is fundamental to students' educational success.

Without the support system of the *NYA WEH Program*, I don't know that these kids would *get* to school. There's lunch here, there's breakfast here, there are bus tickets here, they can work. And it's frustrating when you look around you and everybody [else], you know, on the first day of school everyone [else] has a pencil case full of cool stuff and you don't have a pair of shoes that are not two years old. Poverty, within itself, is a huge issue within the core of Hamilton and within this school. But particularly with the First Nations kids, I think, they seem to have been looked over. I think the assumption is that somebody, somewhere, must be taking care of them. But I think a lot of them slip through the cracks, for quite a while. By nature, poverty makes you move around a lot, so a lot of these kids have been in five, six, seven, eight schools by the time they are in grade 9. It's hard to find a sense of community within that... So the *NYA WEH* room becomes family. (Native Arts teacher, personal communication, September 2010, p. 7)

One unfamiliar with the realities of Aboriginal Peoples might wonder why all these services are so needed. Research shows that Aboriginal student realities are quite different from non-Aboriginal student realities³³. This reality can be best understood given the context and history of colonization and systemic barriers experienced by Aboriginal Peoples. For example, Guimond and Cooke's (2008) research shows that average household incomes for Aboriginal People in Canada remain lower than those of non-Aboriginal Canadians. Although Aboriginal households have seen modest income increases between 1980 and 2000, the gaps between their incomes and those of non-Aboriginal households actually increased. For example, the average household income for registered Indians aged 20-24 increased from \$38 347 in 1980 to \$41, 042 in 2000. Non-Aboriginal people of the same age group experienced increased household income from \$62, 460 in 1980 to \$71, 185 in 2000. Aboriginal youth household incomes thus remained in 2000 only 57% of non-Aboriginal youth households. This trend continues with older Aboriginal households. Aboriginal people

³³ I would like to thank F. Bedek for his help in pulling together the following statistics.

aged 25-29 saw their average household income rise from \$39,010 to \$39,679 while non-Aboriginal 25-29 year-olds average household incomes increased from \$57,281 to \$64,882. This caused the difference in incomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to rise from \$18,271 to \$25,203³⁴ (Guimond & Cooke, 2008, p. 29). Given these figures, the high levels of poverty experienced by Aboriginal Peoples is not surprising. In 2006, 49% of Aboriginal children in Canada living off reserve were living in low-income households compared to 18% for non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 17).

More specific to the Hamilton area, the *Aboriginal Population Profile* (Statistics Canada, 2006a) shows that Aboriginal People had a labour force participation rate of 62.7 percent and an overall unemployment rate of 12.8 percent. For Aboriginal men, the participation and unemployment rates were 66.8 and 11.5 respectively and for Aboriginal women, the rates were 59.4 percent and 14.2 percent respectively. *Community Profiles* (Statistics Canada, 2006b) show that the general labour force participation rate in the area was 64.7 percent, with a male participation rate of 70.2 percent and females at 59.5 percent. The general unemployment rate for this area was only half the rate for Aboriginal Peoples, at 6.5 percent. Men and women had unemployment rates of 6.4 and 6.8 percent respectively.

“Core” housing needs is a concept created by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. This concept defines the state wherein individuals or families have housing that is deficient in one or all of three areas (affordability, quality, or adequacy) and are unable to afford moving to suitable housing (Clatworthy, 2008, p. 92). As Clatwothy’s (2008) research shows, in 2001, “30% of all urban Aboriginal children and youth experience core housing need” (p. 92). Furthermore, the Aboriginal population living off reserve in urban areas suffers core housing need at more than double the levels of non-Aboriginal Canadians (p.

³⁴ Figures provided in constant 2000 dollars.

91). This is not uniform across Canada, however: Aboriginal People in Saskatchewan have 4.4 times core housing need as non-Aboriginal, while the Ontario ratio at 1.7 is tied with Atlantic Canada as the lowest (p. 92).

More specifically, during 2000-2001 urban Aboriginal children and youth had a residential mobility rate 1.9 times higher than non-Aboriginal children and youth (Clatworthy, 2008, p. 93). In practical terms, this means that “more than one quarter of these Aboriginal urban households moved between 2000-2001” (p. 94). High levels of residential mobility are caused by the constant pressure to move due to inadequate, unaffordable or unsafe housing. The relationship among poverty, unemployment, residential mobility and homelessness is clearly linked. Moreover, homelessness is disproportionately an Aboriginal affair. For example, Arboleda-Florez and Holley’s (1997) research shows that “in Toronto, Native people account for 25% of the homeless population, although they make up only 2% of the city’s total population” (as cited in Casavant, 1999, Section C. Aboriginal Peoples, para. 1).

And while mortality figures have improved, there are still significant differences between the mortality rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living in Canada. In 2001, for Aboriginal men between 15 and 30, the mortality rate was 38.5 per 100,000 (down from 75.7 in 1981) compared to 10.6 (down from 19.8) for non-Aboriginal men. For Aboriginal women aged 15-30, mortality was 20.6 in 2001 (down from 34.2 in 1981) compared to 4.4 (down from 6.7 in 1981) for Canadian women who were non-Aboriginal (Guimond & Cooke, 2008, p. 27). Additionally, statistics show that Aboriginal youth in Canada have suicide rates five-to-six times higher than non-Aboriginal youth living in Canada (RCAP, 1995) (Advisory Group on Suicide Prevention, 2003, p. 23). This is

particularly true for Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24. Reports show that from 1989-1993 Aboriginal men between the ages of 15-24 had a suicide rate of 126 per 100,000; this rate compares with 24 per 100,000 for 15-24 year old non-Aboriginal men. Aboriginal women of the same age group have a suicide rate of 35 per 100,000 compared with 5 per 100,000 for young non-Aboriginal women in Canada (Advisory Group on Suicide Prevention, 2003, p. 23).

Although he did not speak often during our Wildfire Gathering, a young man shares his family experience of suicide. He offers,

Isn't Native the highest suicide rate out of all the cultures? I think it was seven family members out of my family that committed suicide. From drinking and everything, and drugs, alcohol. (p. 35, 2367-2372)

Cultural support worker¹ informs our research team of the huge impact poverty has on the lives of the Aboriginal students at this school. He expresses that the city in which this school is located is one of the poorest cities in Canada, and that that is why Aboriginal people are there, because they are poor and Aboriginal and need to live in an urban core. He maintains,

Aboriginal people grow up in poverty and it doesn't matter if it is on-reserve or off-reserve. Aboriginal people are living in poverty whether it is the government's ghetto of a reserve or it's the ghetto they live in within an urban core. They are placed there and they are there because they are Aboriginal. (cultural support workers, p. 14, 921-947)

Cultural support worker¹ also shares that he believes that unfortunately, because many of the teachers were raised in a middle class environment, some of the teachers do not understand student economic realities. As he assesses,

You can't assume anything with these kids; you can't assume that they have a mother and a father; you can't assume that they have a computer; you can't assume that they have a caring person in their life. You can't assume that they have a phone, all of the things that you assume that people have. Like the conveniences. They don't. You

have to assume nothing. You have to go back to bare essentials...that is what I think a lot of the teachers here don't understand. They come from a different upbringing; they [Aboriginal youth] come from a different, whatever they have. (p. 16, 1080-1108)

Also speaking to the impact of residential schools on youths' experience of poverty and relocation administrator1 says,

It's just a complex dynamics of being street involved, and constantly relocating and coming from unstable homes, the trauma, whether it is inter-generational effects of residential schools or inter-generational effects of cyclical poverty. (p. 23, 1554-1561)

An interesting and effective aspect of the *NYA WEH Program* is that youth are empowered to leave conventional classrooms in order to go to the *NYA WEH* room any time they feel the need. As the youth explained to our research team, sometimes it is easier for them to do their work in the *NYA WEH* room than in the classroom. The *NYA WEH* student handbook (Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, n.d), explaining expectations and responsibilities indicates how the process works, "Permission, oral or written is needed from their respective teachers before attending the *NYA WEH* room during class time". And so, youth are able to go to *NYA WEH* room and speak with a cultural support worker if they experience problems or difficulties in their classroom. As administrator1 explains, this process allows space for youth and the cultural workers to explore what is triggering them, what the issues are that they are experiencing, and how to respond to the root systematic needs of the kids (p. 5, 314-323). Teacher1 also explains how access to the *NYA WEH* room is organized,

If the kids are having difficulty in the class they will ask to go to the *NYA WEH* room and they will go and cool off and chill out or actually do some work and that varies on the kid. Depending on the situation, often if I see kids really blow out often it is

because there is so much going on outside of school that being there is probably the safest place for them to be. (p. 13, 861-866)

A vital component of the *NYA WEH Program*, the *NYA WEH* room provides a safe, culturally appropriate and hospitable Indigenous physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual space for the Aboriginal youth at the school. Through “culturally sensitive supports” and by providing “a place where students can feel a sense of belonging” (Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, project background, n.d), the *NYA WEH Program* supports students by responding to root needs of Aboriginal youth. Identifying that often Aboriginal youth do not feel connected to school, administrator¹ describes the ways that the *NYA WEH Program* works to build “A Home at School”,

We realized that these kids didn’t identify school as somewhere that they belonged, and you know, for me, I wanted to create a home where these kids didn’t have one, and why couldn’t it be at school? Why couldn’t it be in a school system? Their peers are here. Okay, so what do you need at home? Okay, you need someone that cares that you showed up at the house. You need family members. You need food. You need clothing, and you need some life skills, and some guidance there, and somebody who believes in you, and everyone has to create that, it can’t just be one person. (p. 5, 324-340)

Through mentoring, academic assistance and tutoring, a breakfast and lunch program, cultural programming, and culturally specific counselling, students in the *NYA WEH Program* are “given the chance to learn in an environment that is both friendly and culturally inviting” (Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, project background, n.d).

I believe that the foundation of the *NYA WEH Program* is the provision of basic needs including food, transportation, and clothing. These needs are provided via the *NYA WEH* room. From here, once these needs are met, the Indigenous space expands to encompass the experiences of Aboriginal youth at this secondary school. A visual

representation of the ways in which I organize my understandings of the *NYA WEH Program* is provided below in Figure 4. Through this image we see the ways in which the *NYA WEH* community orders their educational and cultural experiences. We see that energies are focused on Native Studies curriculum, relationships, and culture and tradition, three keys to the success of the *NYA WEH Program*. We also see through this illustration, the ways in which youth are growing stronger through such focused energies. By building a “Home at School” the work of the *NYA WEH Program* is building stronger Indigenous People. These categories could also be conceptualized as a Medicine Wheel. I thank Dr. Restoule for sharing his insights and pointing to how he saw curriculum being represented as the mental, relationships as the emotional, cultures and traditions as the spiritual, and food, transportation and clothing as the physical.

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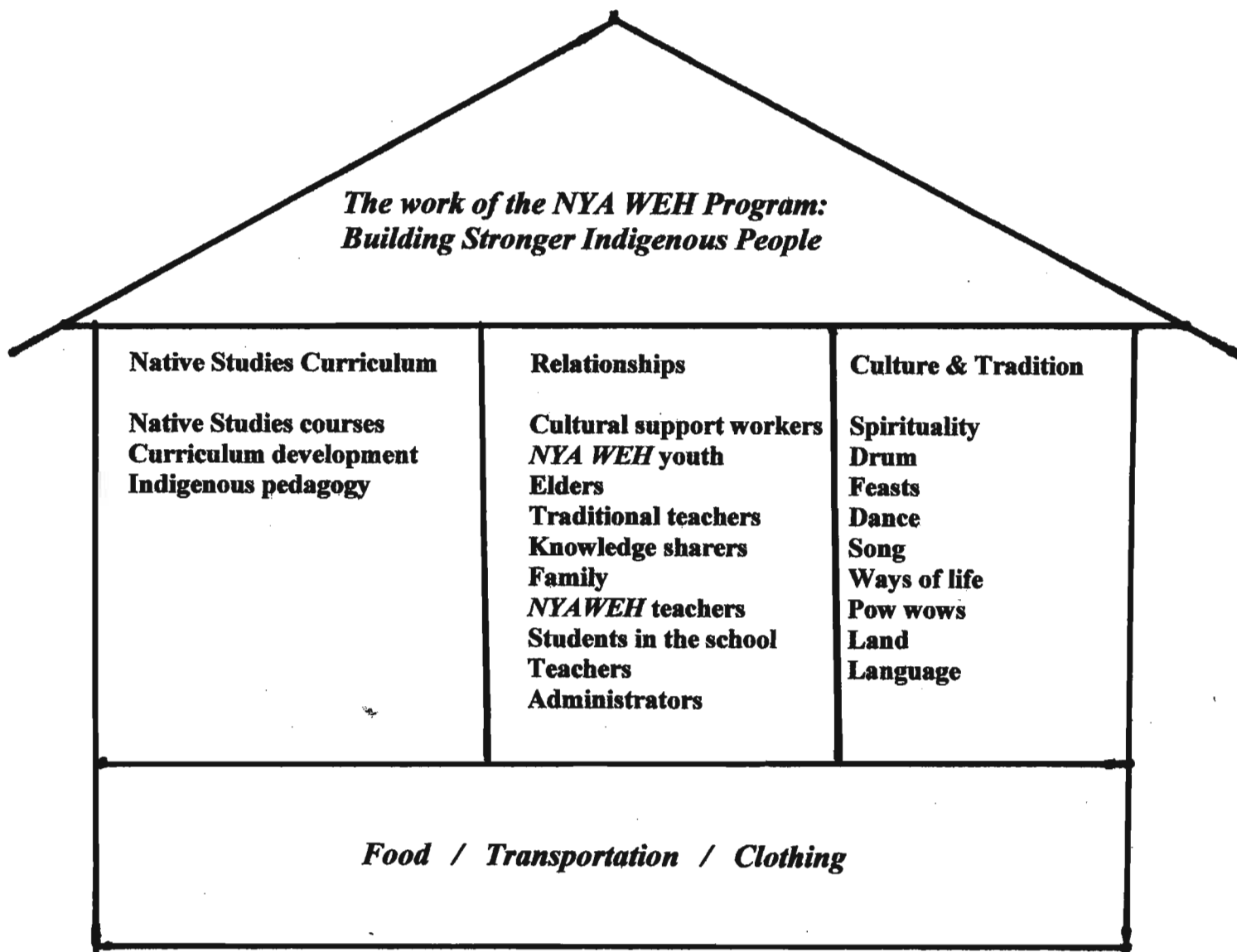


Figure 4. A Home at School.

Native Studies curriculum: First key element of the NYA WEH Program.

As indicated above in Figure 4, *A Home at School* is organized under three key themes, the first of which, Native Studies curriculum, I examine in the following pages. Chapter four then takes up relationships, while chapter five is geared to an analysis of culture and tradition. My discussion in this section, unfolds in the following way. I discuss curriculum development and the vetting of courses and course content. I, then, look to strategies developed by the teaching staff to support Aboriginal learners, suggesting that these strategies are in keeping with Indigenous pedagogies. Next, I look to some of the tensions that exist between the Aboriginal learners in the *NYA WEH Program* and non-*NYA WEH* teachers. I conclude this chapter by looking at funding considerations as the program moves forward.

Curriculum development.

When the *NYA WEH Program* was first being developed, it was realized that a physical space as well as academic support needed to be cultivated concurrently. Accordingly, the school principal and the soon-to-become Native Arts teacher quickly worked together to develop the first Native Studies course, a grade 9 Native arts course. The following year, the school began to also offer a second Native Studies course, a grade 10 Native Arts course. The third Aboriginal focused course that was added to Sir John A. Macdonald's course calendar was a grade 11 history course. The Native Studies curriculum that is currently available to students at Sir John A. Macdonald has now expanded to include six Aboriginal focused courses including a second history course, an Aboriginal media

course and an Aboriginal food and regalia course. These courses help students to learn more about Aboriginal histories, cultures and worldviews. The chart below describes the Native Studies courses offered at this school during the 2010/2011 academic year.

Native Studies courses at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School³⁵

NAC 101 and NAC 201 – Expressing Aboriginal Culture

Learn about Aboriginal culture. Make and play a deerskin drum, learn to sing traditional songs, make art prints and more, all from a Native perspective.

NBV 3C1 – Aboriginal Media

Learn about crafting documentary videos from an Aboriginal point of view.

NBV3E – Aboriginal Food and Regalia

This course focuses on the beliefs, values and inspirations of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Students will examine issues of identity facing Indians, Métis and Inuit peoples and their relationships to land and nature, as well as to one another within their communities and working environments. Students will also learn how traditional and contemporary beliefs and values influence the present day aspirations and actions of Aboriginal peoples.

NDA3M – Current Aboriginal Issues in Canada

- *Examine the issues and challenges that confront Native peoples in Canada*
 - *Develop an understanding of the concerns and aspirations of Canada's Native peoples*
 - *Plan and conduct research on issues that have an impact on Canada's Native peoples*
- Lots of guest speakers, trips to local sites and Royal Ontario Museum*

NDW4M1 – Issues of Indigenous Peoples in a Global Context

- *Examine the issues and challenges that confront Indigenous peoples worldwide*
 - *Develop an understanding of the concerns and aspirations of the world's Indigenous population*
 - *Plan and conduct research on global issues that have an impact on Indigenous peoples*
- Trips to Art Gallery of Ontario or IMAX and Royal Ontario Museum*

Although the vast majority of students taking these courses are Aboriginal, all six of these academic courses are available to the entire student body at Sir John A. Macdonald. As the Native arts teacher highlights, the goal is to teach all students about Aboriginal Peoples.

Teacher2 tells us that in his class, two of the fourteen students are non-Aboriginal. And this

³⁵ Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School (2010)

teacher explains, “they [non-Aboriginal students] have been accepted by the Aboriginal students as well. I think that they [Aboriginal students] think it is really respectful of their [non-Aboriginal students] taking an interest in the Aboriginal culture, it’s neat to see” (p. 12, 773-778).

Courses with an Aboriginal focus are now being offered at various public high schools across Ontario. The Ontario Ministry of Education develops Native Studies course codes and when there is enough demand at a school, the school offers the course. Essential to the success of the Native Studies courses offered at Sir John A. Macdonald is the way in which they were developed. As our research team learned, these courses were locally developed. For example, the process of developing the original grade 9 Native Arts class (Expressing Aboriginal Culture) was driven by a desire to develop a course which brought together course content and teacher expertise. The Native Arts teacher explains how she worked with the Ministry guidelines and her own background to develop the first Native Studies course. She explains,

Initially, it really was flying by the seat of my pants. The guidelines from the Ministry were very non-specific; there was nothing by way of real curriculum...it developed over time. The Ministry had a course code and brief descriptors about, you know, you must cover things like sovereignty, etc. and my job was to translate that into medium, media, that I was comfortable and familiar with...part of it was, because I have a background in visual arts, as well as music and theatre arts, so it seemed to be a logical place to start to integrate some of the cultural protocols. (personal communication, September 2010, p. 1)

From this teacher’s comment we see the blending of teaching expertise with the needs of the school’s growing Aboriginal population. Both teachers further explain that as youth became more familiar and experienced with their own traditions and cultures, they contribute ideas to the development of the course curriculum. For example, through the Native Arts classes,

youth became involved in print making, photographic and video projects as well as 'zine projects. These projects allow students to explore their heritage through artistic expression. As teacher1 articulates, "It gives them a chance to express more of what their world is, and then you really see their homes, their lives, and what is really important to them" (p. 23, 1519-1523).

The Native Arts courses are described as organic courses, shifting over time and changing with grants acquired. For example, this academic school year (2010/2011), the students in the Native Arts classes will be working on a dramatic production entitled *Gookom's Purse*. Emerging through collaboration between the Native Arts classes, Aboriginal playwright Barbara Croall, the Métis Women's Circle, Ontario Trillium Foundation, and New Horizons for Seniors, this project brings older people from the Aboriginal community into the school to work with *NYA WEH* students. For this play, the program has also secured a First Nations lighting designer from Toronto, as well as a First Nations visual arts graduate from Sheridan College. Connecting youth with Aboriginal community members and bringing in role models to show the youth what work options are possible after high school is a really important part of the *NYA WEH Program*. Teacher1 explains that many of the youth are unaware of existing workplace possibilities.

The development of the Aboriginal Media course is another example of the ways in which the Native Studies curriculum has grown organically. This particular course emerged from a course proposal written by the Native Arts teacher. She explains that she wanted the youth to have an opportunity to learn how to use tools such as power-point and digital imaging. She, therefore, developed this course in order to help students develop not only their artistic expression skills, but also computer skill which they could apply across various

subject areas. Describing the process the school went through with this particular course, she explains, “we had to sort of jerry-rig a course code, and I’m waiting to hear from the Ministry what the actual course code will be, but we already have the kids enrolled in it” (personal communication, September 2010, p. 1).

And so, through pushes by the *NYA WEH Program* itself, the Native Studies curriculum moves forward, offering more and more courses. The school is now just left scrambling to find curriculum codes for the new courses they wish to offer to their students. Creatively, if presented with course code barriers, Teacher1 shares that the program will simply run the course under another designation. For example, for the Aboriginal Food and Regalia course, the school started off with a course code that was available for Native Studies and, modifying the course slightly, the school offers a course that met the interests of the Aboriginal youth at their school under that course code. Teacher1 explains, however, that there are funding barriers to the running of this course. Material costs are high, and so, even though many students wish to take this course, only some students will be able to as there will only be one class offered this year.

All of these initiatives grow out of a commitment to Aboriginal education for Self-determination. Administrator1 explains that the development of the Native Studies courses offered at Sir John A. Macdonald is an example of education that is being designed by Aboriginal people. This approach to teaching and learning is in keeping with literature on Indigenous Pedagogy which argues for the need for locally developed curriculum.

Vetting of Native Studies courses.

Another noteworthy system established at Sir John A. Macdonald is the vetting of the Native Studies courses. This process has been put in place to assist the *NYA WEH* teachers as they develop course content. While each of the *NYA WEH* teachers has experience working with Aboriginal communities, they are themselves non-Aboriginal and so recognize the ways in which the cultural support workers and the larger Aboriginal community is able to assist in the development of culturally appropriate and accurate courses. The cultural support workers meet with the *NYA WEH* teachers, reviewing lesson plans and making curriculum suggestions. As the principal explains,

[Our teachers] work with our cultural support workers to deliver a curriculum that has been vetted culturally by the people best qualified to vet it. The people whose culture it is...[Teachers] sit down with [cultural support worker] and goes through the expectations and goes through lesson plans and opinions because that is the danger, teaching white man's opinion of history. And that is vetted through [the cultural worker] as well. So the kids are receiving, any formal education they are receiving in this school, has been vetted by the Aboriginal community as a whole, including our Elder. So we have been very cognisant of that fact, and those have been very strict orders to teachers who are teaching those courses. (administrators, p. 27, 1807-1828)

This process is hugely significant! Generally, it is very infrequent for teachers to have their lesson plans vetted by non-teachers. More specifically, Aboriginal communities historically have not been involved in development of school curriculum. The very fact that the *NYA WEH* teachers and the cultural support workers at Sir John A. Macdonald work in tandem, and are required to work together on curriculum development and delivery, helps to circumvent the injustices that arise when Aboriginal education is developed by non-Aboriginal people. Stereotypical representations and inaccurate information become points of disconnection for Aboriginal students, and literature shows that a leading cause of student

disengagement is curriculum that inaccurately represents Aboriginal Peoples, their histories and worldviews. Organically constructed and based on student needs and interests, these courses, rather than being developed from a top-down perspective, are constructed from the bottom-up. As teacher1 holds, “this is something that has been locally developed” (p. 5, 286-287). By ensuring that curriculum meets learner needs, at this school, the cycle of disengagement is being interrupted. Since the inception of the *NYA WEH Program*, the Native Studies curriculum offered at this school which is grounded in Indigenous principles of teaching and learning is a successful example of Indigenous pedagogy in the classroom. Furthermore, the vetting of curriculum is an important example of non-Aboriginal teachers becoming educated in the implementation of an Aboriginal education program. This process is further evidence of the alliance-building which is occurring at Sir John A. Macdonald³⁶.

³⁶ Although the task of my thesis is not to review the emerging Alliance literature (Ball, 2004, Bishop, 2002; Davis, 2010), these newer modes of scholarship explore political and activist Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliances. Suggesting that cross-cultural partnerships are a viable way to assist in decolonizing efforts, this literature problematizes some of the terms of the literature on Aboriginal Self-determination. For example, critics argue that this body of literature tends toward essentialism and binary categories, and does not seem to address the multiple ways in which successful, effective alliances have been built between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. Lawrence (2005), however, responds to this critique stating that scholars from these various bodies of literature are situated differently. As she explains, for example, postcolonial theorists are not under the same constraints as scholars focused on Aboriginal Self-determination, “Most of the postcolonial scholarship is premised on states which have won national independence, which means their right to survival as peoples is not disputed (as cited in Thorpe, 2005, p. 6). Lawrence (2005) further argues that hybridity discourses which emerge in alliance research, thus, do not necessarily work in North American contexts. She explains further, “The other assumption which often accompanies an emphasis on hybridity is that ‘ethnic absolutism’ is untenable. None of this works for Native people because the land is occupied by the most powerful nation-state in the world (or its satellites). Whether it is healthy or not, Native societies have to be able to close themselves to outsiders when survival is threatened” (as cited in Thorpe, 2005, p. 6). There are, however, examples of cross-cultural alliances and partnerships both in political, activist, and educational contexts. Ball’s (2004) research, for example, highlights an educational program that brings Indigenous knowledge into postsecondary classroom. Exploring partnerships between First Nations and postsecondary institutions, Ball (2004) argues that new approaches, including cross-cultural alliances in educational contexts “are needed in order to support the capacity-building of Indigenous communities” (p. 456).

Indigenous pedagogy.

Indigenous pedagogy is concerned not only with course content but also with the ‘how’ of teaching course content. In this way, it is not just about what they are doing in the Native Studies courses that is working, it is also how they are doing it that has led to the *NYA WEH Program*’s success. Describing Aboriginal pedagogy, Annie, a Cree grandmother says “We teach what we know as an act of love” (as cited in Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 157). This description of pedagogy differs from western definitions which often describe pedagogy as “the science of teaching” (Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 157). At Sir John A. Macdonald, the Native Studies teachers seem to be coming from this place of love. Every decision the teachers make about the teaching and learning environments they work to create is based on an understanding of who learners are, and what learners bring with them to the learning environment. One strategy utilized by the Native Studies teachers was the timing of the courses.

Staff knew that if they offered the Native Studies courses first thing in the day, students would make sure to be at school on time. And so, the school offers the Native Arts grade 9 and 10 classes first period of the day. The remaining Native Studies courses are strategically offered in the afternoon, after lunch. This decision was made in order to encourage students to remain at school throughout the day. Another strategic decision was also to begin each class with drumming. We learned through the narratives that the youth have become completely engaged with the drumming and, as the Native Arts teacher shares, it was a good starting place for the youth.

We initially start with drumming because it is the heartbeat and it teaches them immense things: about working together intuitively, about following instructions, about introducing the protocols of First Nations people, which are codes of conduct

really that are more universally applicable than just around the drum. Starting from that place has had outstanding results. It engages kids, they attend regularly, they know that it's disrespectful to not come on time, and we have developed a core group of kids over time that do performances outside of the class. (personal communication, September 2010, p. 3)

Other important teaching and learning strategies also center on knowing the learner.

As teacher1 and teacher2 share, through time they have come to know how to get the youth's attention, how to engage youth, how to bring youth together around the learning experience, and even how to keep youth engaged when youth begin to shut down. To begin, teacher1 tells us that she believes that getting Aboriginal students' attention is slightly different from getting non-Aboriginal students' attention.

First of all, you have to get their attention. And sometimes, that is a very subtle thing to do. You start from a place of quiet instead of pushing out and questioning and just leave them lots of space for them to think and respond orally. (p. 15, 975-981)

Creating space for classroom discussion is an important element of Indigenous pedagogy. It also recognizes the epistemic conflict between oral tradition and reading and writing.

Teacher2 and teacher1 both share with us that when it comes to the written word, students tend to shut down. Teacher1 contends that reading and writing skills were not adequately developed in elementary school which presents challenges to youth when they begin high school. Teacher1 shares with us that often, Aboriginal students react with blank stares when given a page of words to contend with, a reaction not found with non-Aboriginal students (p. 4, 219-222). Teacher2 confirms that reading and writing is a challenge for the Aboriginal youth in the *NYA WEH Program*. One strategy this teacher therefore utilizes is breaking down those components of the course. The teachers explain that mixing things up helps to keep students engaged by incorporating learning materials such as videos, movies and

documentaries. As one teacher identifies, utilizing a multitude of strategies and materials is an effective way to engage youth.

My course revolves heavily around literacy, I mean, there is lots of reading to be done, and lots of analysis and textbooks and novels. But I have to do the same thing. I have to mix it up, I have to be diverse. I can't just give the students reading day in and day out. So sometimes we will have a small passage, sometimes I will break things down in notes, sometimes we will have a discussion, and sometimes a debate. And for some things, we will watch videos and movies, documentaries. So I have to do the exact same thing and mix it up. I just can't constantly bombard them with paragraphs and essays and this and that. (p. 16, 1092-1108)

Our research team was told that two issues were significant barriers to academic achievement: students not attending class and students not handing in assignments. Teacher2 assesses that there are varying reasons why students might not submit an assignment. One reason identified is that sometimes students feel that the work they have done is inadequate (p. 18, 1208). Teacher1 also shares how negative self-esteem and self-concept impact students' achievement in the classroom. This teacher, suggesting that students often do not have confidence that they can do an assignment, says, "I have never run into a group of kids that are so self-deprecatd... they are like, this is shit, I can't do this" (p. 22, 1501-1502). And, as teacher1 further explains, sometimes it takes re-doing an assignment just to confirm to the youth that they actually can do it. Teacher1 shares this process, commenting, "when they are done, and it's successful, they are like, 'oh, I didn't know I could do that, it's a mistake'. So, let's do another one" (p. 22, 1504-1506). Through the nurturing from teacher1 and teacher2, youth are learning more about themselves and their abilities. In this way, we can see the ways in which the "hows" of curriculum are positively impacting youth identity and self-esteem.

Another strategy utilized by the Native Studies teachers is the modification of written assignment. For example, when it comes to written tasks, teacher2 says that rather than giving youth a project that involves a lot of writing, a useful strategy is to break the assignment down into smaller, more manageable sizes. Explaining that if a written assignment is too big, it will not be handed in by the students, teacher2 describes how important it is for teachers to modify the mainstream curriculum by breaking assignments up into chunks. In so doing, this teacher again responds to learning tensions and epistemic conflicts by doing what needs to be done so that students can succeed. The research team is told that overall, through the use of such strategies, the teachers are seeing an increase in literacy rates. Expressing that he works within the framework of what the students are capable, teacher2 says, “I have taken the Ministry documents and I have looked at them and adapted them for what I feel my students are capable of being the best and most successful at” (p. 5 326-330).

When it comes to assignment completion, another strategy employed by the Native Studies teachers is to actually pursue students and encourage them to submit what they have done so far. Teacher2 tells us that even if the project is not completely done, students are told that some marks are better than no marks. Most importantly, however, both teachers advocate for students to be allowed to submit late assignments. As these two teachers contend, often non-*NYAWEH* teachers will not make this concession, refusing to accept late assignments. Allowing youth this opportunity, however, is what makes the difference in student success. As teacher2 maintains, there are so many reasons why students are not submitting assignments on time. And, without the ability to hand in a late assignment, students just will not graduate. As teacher2 judges, not accepting late papers from students penalizes them too

much (p. 19, 1242-1244). Asserting that these concessions are necessary, teacher2 confirms how important it is for teachers to be open to flexible timelines. As this teacher pointedly determines, “that is what I have to be open to, and if I was one of those rigid teachers, it would not work. You have to make those concessions” (p. 18, 1233-1237).

The *NYA WEH* teachers make an important observation; some teachers are more relaxed in their pedagogy while others are more rigid. Teacher1 informs us saying that there are some teachers who are “old school” and demand what they understand as “total attention and respect at all times” (p. 14, 925-926). This teacher expresses, however, that it would not work well to have these teachers working with Aboriginal students at the school. As teacher1 determines, “I think that there are certainly people within this school that you would not want dealing with the kids because they are themselves a bit rigid” (p. 6, 402-406). The rigidity that teacher1 identifies does not work for Aboriginal students. Confirming that the lecture style western approach to teaching is ineffective and is not well received by the *NYA WEH* students, teacher1 remembers,

I’ve still been in a staffroom, where someone has come in and gleefully told me that they talked for seventy minutes, and I thought, my God, I’m sure the kids took a lapse at the first commercial break. (p. 14, 928-933)

The students themselves also tell us that they respond more to a more interactive teaching style. Young woman1, for example, tells us that even some of the Elders and traditional teachers who come into the school present lecture style. When asked if she finds the teaching interesting, Young woman1 tells us “Some can be interesting, but some, they are just talking at you. I guess it is just the way they do it, and if they are just talking at you, and they have like a full presentation, or whatever...It’s good...” (p. 6, 392-397). When asked if she would prefer a more interactive approach, where students could ask question, young

woman1 confirmed that this approach to teaching and learning would work better for her (p. 6, 383-403). The young men we spoke with also confirmed that they preferred a more hands-on approach to learning. For example, young man2 tells us that the Native Arts class and the rest of the Native Studies courses tend to be much more hands-on than the courses he took at a previous school. As he describes, “They don’t do anything, they sit in class and do work from textbooks and talk about things. So I find it better here, because when I work hands-on, I learn a lot more” (p. 5, 302-310). Three other male students confirm this sentiment, telling us that they learn best through hands-on experience (p. 5, 314-326). Explaining why this approach to learning works for him, young man2 shares “you have to do it, instead of them reading something and saying, okay do it” (p. 5, 331-332).

The other students also share that there are real teaching style differences between *NYA WEH* teachers and non-*NYA WEH* teachers. The students share, for example, that they really appreciate being able to work on projects in the classroom with the help of teachers. However, students identify that this is not usually the way non-Native Studies classes operate. As young woman1 tells us, some of her non-*NYA WEH* teachers will spend the entire class time talking at students and then, at the end of the period, give out the assignment (p. 10, 626-629). Young woman1 explains that this approach to teaching and learning is not helpful to her. She would rather access help from teachers in the classroom rather than have a take-home assignment. A more hands-on relationship with teachers, where teachers explain what the assignment is about and what is expected of the students, emerged as a theme that was quite important to the youth with whom we spoke. As young woman2 offers,

The other teachers don’t really even help and then [the *NYA WEH*] teachers and [cultural support workers] are there, and they will explain just what you have to do to get your work done...it helps me out better and everything. (p. 10, 647-658)

The *NYA WEH* youth clearly articulate the learning environments that work best for them. They tell us that they want to learn in environments that reflect their values and beliefs, environments which mirror traditional Aboriginal education. These Indigenous environments are concerned with the “we” in learning, and are thus designed to facilitate connected and integrated learning. Aboriginal learning strategies thus challenge Western educational traditions which focus on individual educational success. This western approach to education is ultimately concerned with the “I” in both learning and life. Teachers 1 and 2 tell us that the *NAY WEH* students work together; they are a family both in the classroom and out and are most receptive to working together on projects. As teacher1 says, “and it’s all I can do to stop them from helping each other work on things. And you know, wait a minute. Are you going to share the marks” (p. 6, 409-412)? In this quotation, the ways in which Indigenous and Western worldviews conflict is illuminated. How to evaluate student marks is a leading factor in the design of the western public education system. At the base, this is an epistemic conflict revolving around questions of what is learning, how can and do people learn, and how best to evaluate ‘successful’ learning. I suggest that teachers need to be aware of this tension as they work toward developing solutions to the tension between “we” and “I” focused learning. Another important element of Indigenous Pedagogy is knowledge sharing. The Native Studies teachers we spoke with told us that they make sure to create space for dialogue in the classroom. Describing how youth share their cultures and traditions with each other, teacher2 offers,

They are very respectful and listen to the different viewpoints that I offer. And I always give them a chance to disagree, if they disagree. Or if they find something that they don’t agree with, or have a different viewpoint, sure add to it. And we discuss it and bring it into conversation. (p. 6, 384-392)

As more Native Studies courses are offered and more teachers become part of the Native Studies teaching team, it will be important for these important aspects of Indigenous pedagogy to continue in the classroom. As we have learned from the *NYA WEH* youth, it is from an Indigenous pedagogical perspective that learning best occurs.

Conclusion.

As the program became successful and gained a system-wide reputation within the Aboriginal community in Hamilton, and the HWDSB, it quickly faced the dilemma of figuring out how to meet the needs of so many youth with little funding available. In the beginning, the program survived because the principal would go on speaking tours to raise funds and various people would make personal donations. Another strategy was leveraging with food banks. As well, one of the administrators would bring food in weekly to cook for the youth (p. 17, 1148-1164). As administrator1 describes, “we were victims of our own success. Now we had all these kids here and we didn’t want to water down the program” (p. 16, 1095-1098).

Encouraged by how well the program was being received by the youth, the donors re-invested which helped to ensure students would continue to receive program supports. Grant applications submitted by the principal were also successful which helped to alleviate financial strain. As of 2009, the *NYA WEH Program* is a *Program of Choice* which means that Aboriginal students throughout the HWDSB are able to attend Sir John A. Macdonald in order to access the program. Another marker of the program’s success is the Front Line Excellence Award recently received. As part of this award, the school will receive 1.74 million dollars over the next five years.

In addition to the material support provided to Aboriginal youth, it is clear that the academic support offered through the Native Studies curriculum at Sir John A. Macdonald is fundamental to the success of the *NYA WEH Program*. What is also especially noteworthy about the curriculum is the way in which it is developed. There was no template when they started this program. As administrator¹ shares, “our concept was created by the kids, and for the kids, and continues to evolve as the kids evolve” (p. 32, 2187-2190). It is clear that the Native Studies courses have been designing and delivering in ways that meet the needs of Aboriginal students. The teachers tell us that it is hard work and requires a lot of patience. They also tell us, though, that it is fun, and incredibly rewarding (p. 10, 670-682). As teacher¹ articulates, at the root of it all is incredible passion (p. 20, 1367).

In this third chapter, I have described the *NYA WEH* room, and all that goes on in this culturally-centered space. Through an image depicting how I organize my understanding of the *NYA WEH Program*, I identified the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* works to build a “home at school”. I, then, argued that through the first key element of the program, the Native Studies curriculum, the *NYA WEH Program* works to bring Indigenous education into the public school system. Now, in the following two chapters I will provide my analysis of the second and third key elements of the *NYA WEH Program*; relationships, and culture and tradition.

Chapter 4:
Introducing the Second Key Element -
The Relationships of the NYA WEH Program

“It’s hard because some days we are their fathers. Some days we are their best friend. Some days we are their big brother. Some days we are their disciplinarian.”³⁷

Introduction: Building multiple, complex relationships.

In this thesis, I look to explore the educational narratives of young Aboriginal women and men, amongst others, as I take up the central questions guiding my thesis. Those questions are *Is there is a relationship between the cultural support services offered at Sir John A. Macdonald and the high levels of Aboriginal student engagement at this school?* And *Is the NYA WEH Program an example of ‘best practices’ that should be taken up by other schools and boards of education?* In this and the following chapter I continue my analysis of the *NYA WEH* narratives to identify what this school is doing to more deeply engage Aboriginal students. One window into the *NYA WEH Program* is through the multiple, complex relationships that the cultural support workers develop with the members of the *NYA WEH* community. This is the focus of this fourth chapter: an in-depth look at the second key element, the relationships of the *NYA WEH Program*.^{*}

The entire *NYA WEH Program* is grounded in the delicate work of relationship-building, and it is clear that these relationships are integral to the program’s success. I, therefore, illustrate the ways in which the cultural support workers strive to construct healthy, equitable relationships with all members of the *NYA WEH* community and beyond. I begin with a focus on the relationships between the cultural support workers and the youth who

³⁷ (cultural support workers, p. 14, 911-919).

participate in the *NYA WEH Program*. I then look at cultural support workers' relationships with the families of the *NYA WEH* students. Next, I look at the relationships that are being built with non-*NYA WEH* students. This discussion helps to illuminate school culture. In the final fourth section, I shift to explore the cultural support workers' relationships with teachers and administrators at the school. Through this lens we are able to see the multiple ways that cultural support workers are required to "walk in two worlds" (Styres, Zinga, Bennett & Bomberly, 2010). This need is facilitated by the cultural support workers' ability to shift epistemically, as required by varying relationships. We also see the tensions and resistance to the *NYA WEH Program* that emerges from some of the staff at this school. Through close examination of these numerous multi-faced relationships, we can see that the work of alliance-building is the glue that holds the *NYA WEH Program* together.

Creating the different generation³⁸: The NYA WEH cultural support workers.

Five years after the *NYA WEH Program* was initiated, our research conclusively shows that the decision to support the cultural support worker position was correct; this position is a central component of the program and is foundational to its success. The *NYA WEH Program* currently employs three cultural support workers. Each of the three cultural support workers is male and between the ages of 25 and 40. Two cultural support workers are Ojibway, the third, Mohawk (Onieda). Our research team met with the cultural support workers and asked them to share with us their experiences of schooling and what brought them to this work. Each cultural support worker informed us that, similar to the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*, they, too, all grew up with a lack of cultural knowledge of

³⁸ (cultural support worker1, p. 9, 557).

their Aboriginal backgrounds. They disclose that, from this place of knowledge deficit, they have spent years connecting to and learning about their heritages, and are now becoming knowledge sharers, working with youth so that the youth, too, will come to learn their heritages. One of the cultural support workers shares his cultural and educational journey with us, saying,

I grew up my whole life not really knowing anything about Aboriginal culture because both of my grandparents went to residential schools. We were successfully assimilated and, like my grandparents, I had an aunt and an uncle and my Dad and they all went to church and they were all baptized. My Grandmother has a big thing of John 3:16 in her kitchen and my Grandfather always had a big cross hanging in his Cadillac and it wasn't until I was a teenager that my uncle started working with an Elder from BC and kind of brought the Aboriginal culture. So we started going to fasting camps and doing sweats and that kind of stuff, so it kind of piqued my interest a little bit, but I was still learning mainstream. (p. 21, 1382-1393)

Committed to their beliefs in communal responsibility, the cultural support workers communicate their educational journeys. As one explains, his intent is to show youth that they too can achieve a high school diploma. He tries to convey the message to youth that anything is possible,

I just wanted to succeed because where I grew up, you know, I would say probably out of a group of twenty of us, I would say that maybe two of us have a high school diploma. I would say that out of my group, I'm the only one with a College education and I thought if I can do it, then I could help others and show them that it is possible, that anything is possible. If I can do it from a little remote community up-north then anything is possible and I just thought that I'm younger so I would be able to really help them out in certain areas. (p. 20, 1358-1373)

And help they do. Through the multiple associations that they nurture, the cultural support workers strive to continuously strengthen the relationships they have with the variety of folks involved in the *NYA WEH Program*. Relationship-building can be observed between the cultural support workers and the youth in the program, their families, the teachers involved in

the program, the students at the school who are not part of the program, teachers and administrators, as well as with Aboriginal community members. I spend this chapter highlighting these various relationships because I believe that through their roles, these cultural support workers are unmistakably the underpinning of the *NYA WEH Program*. Although they have mountains of work and responsibility, they labour untiringly in their dedication and commitment to support Aboriginal youth. This work that they do is critical to the success of Aboriginal education, and it all centers on cultivating healthy rapports and bonds with those connected to the *NYA WEH Program*. A mixed-group successfully working together, supporters of the *NYA WEH Program* are positive example of alliance-building³⁹. As cultural support worker1 tells us, they wanted to be part of this research project because they have been at this for five years, and they want to show the good they have been doing (p. 3, 193-194). It is my hope that I am able to adequately illustrate the good that these cultural support workers do in their efforts to support Aboriginal education.

And they will say, wow, he cares about me, he took the time⁴⁰: Building relationships with the NYA WEH youth.

Required to fulfill an abundance of tasks, the cultural support workers are responsible for supporting and developing relationships with over 120 Aboriginal students who attend Sir John A. Macdonald. To begin, in their role of recruiters, they develop relationships with students even before the youth join the *NYA WEH Program*. As they reach out to Aboriginal

³⁹ The success of the *NYA WEH Program* relies heavily on the cultural support worker, the Elders, the family, and the Aboriginal community. Analysis shows, too, that the program clearly relies on non-Indigenous people in the school system. As identified in footnote 36 on p. 114, there is an interesting literature that looks at Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliance-building (see, for example, Bishop, 2002; Davis, 2010). These Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars argue that non-Indigenous allies can be critical. This literature might be a way of further exploring the positive cross-cultural relationships that were developed to support the *NYA WEH Program*.

⁴⁰ (cultural support worker, p. 18, 1215).

youth in the community, the cultural support workers help to facilitate the transition from other public high schools to Sir John A. Macdonald. Then, once students join the *NYA WEH Program*, the cultural support workers provide academic support in the form of tutoring and mentorship. They also provide support in a variety of other ways: from counselling, to advocacy, to acting as buffers between Aboriginal students and teachers, administration, other students, parents and community.

When we asked the young women about their experiences in the *NYA WEH Program*, they quickly began to talk about their appreciation for the support of the cultural support workers and the *NYA WEH Program* room. We were told that one of the best things about having the *NYA WEH Program* at the school is that youth could go to the program room to access one-on-one help. One young woman told us that it was important to her to be able to access the room if she was having trouble working in a classroom and that she knew there would always be a cultural support worker there to speak with if she felt the need (young woman1, p. 2, 114-124). The young men also share that they accessed the cultural support workers through the *NYA WEH* room in order to work on school assignments, for one-on-one help, or simply to speak with them about a range of items. In these ways, we can see that the cultural support workers fulfill important roles as tutors and counsellors.

Speaking with the young men and women, it was apparent that the youth had a sense that the cultural support workers were there for them, to talk to when things were getting hard or when they needed support. The cultural support workers share with us, however, that students did not automatically have faith that they would advocate for them. Relationships with the *NYA WEH* youth took careful building and it was not until the youth had confidence that the cultural support workers would actually do something to help that youth started to

approach them. Once the cultural support workers did show the youth that they would advocate for them, youth began to trust them (p. 18, 1206-1208).

It is clear to see the substantial relationships that are developing between the cultural support workers and the youth participating in the *NYA WEH Program*. Young man6 comments on these strong relationships. As he shares, cultural support worker1 and cultural support worker2 are friends. Sharing his experiences, this youth illuminates the holistic relationship that is developing between the youth and the cultural support workers.

Well, I don't really look at them as cultural support workers or teachers. I just look at them as a friend. ...Yeah, like a teacher would just help you but cultural support worker2 and cultural support worker1 would actually come and see us on the weekend if we would ask them to help. They are more of a friend than a teacher or a cultural support worker, but that is just the way I look at it, but they might see it different. ...And another thing is like, when stuff comes up for the weekends, like cultural support worker is going golfing and I am going with him and he asks me if I want to come and stuff like that. A normal teacher wouldn't really do that, they would just be like I don't want to see you, go, get out of my hair. (young man6, p. 32, 2146-2196)

This young man makes a clear distinction between the relationships he has with the cultural support workers and the relationships he has with his teachers. His comment speaks to how important he believes it is for relationships to extend out of the classroom and into his personal life. Such integrated relationships are holistic and allow for greater understanding of one another. By spending time together outside of the classroom, youth and cultural support workers continue to develop trust which allows youth to feel connected to and thus open up to the cultural support workers. The comment testifies to the ongoing work of building trust between students and cultural support workers: it is not there automatically.

This integrated approach to relationships with students, however, can at times place the cultural support workers in a tough spot. As they told us, there have been instances where

youth have come to them with serious problems and it was necessary to involve others.

Having the responsibility to report or follow guidelines is something the cultural support workers make clear to youth. In spite of these structural requirements, however, the cultural support workers still manage to maintain trust with the youth. They do this by committing to youth that they will go through the process together. There are no surprises for youth, as they work through the situation together with the cultural support workers. Cultural support worker1 sheds light on how they manage these difficult situations. He says,

And sometimes they put us in hard positions too, where like myself, or cultural support worker2, we don't want to lose our jobs, because they came to us with a really serious problem. But then we have to explain to them that I am going to do this, and it is not going to be a surprise. We are going to do this, [it's] not just 'I'm going to tell somebody and then pass you off to somebody'. We are going to go through this.... and that is the big thing. We will do this together, we will get through this. It's not just 'I'm gonna tell the vice-principal and then you're gonna go down and tell the vice-principal'....We're gonna get through this together, and that is where the relationships come. ... Yeah, and we always explain that to them that we are friends, but we also have jobs and we also have families that we have to support, and I can't afford to lose my job. So I have to do it, but when I do it, we will do it together. (p. 18, 1182-1249)

The cultural support workers share an example of such an instance. A young student came to the cultural support workers because she had been sexually assaulted and was uncomfortable talking to her parents about what had happened. The cultural support workers stood by her throughout the entire process, from contacting the principal to police involvement. They went with her to the hospital and spoke with her parents. She was never alone; they were with her and supported her throughout the entire situation. As cultural support worker1 shares, that is the message they send to all youth: "You will never be alone" (p. 8, 554).

Another important piece of relationship-building is the process that has been put in place so that all Aboriginal students always have a cultural support worker with them if ever they went to

the office. This policy was developed in order to ensure that youth always have an advocate with them. As the principal explains,

One of the things that I did put in place was I never wanted an Aboriginal student to be speaking with the vice-principal without the Aboriginal cultural support worker there. That is not to protect the vice-principal. That is not to do anything other than to let the kid feel that the person who is advising him, and working with him, is his advocate. And a lot of times the vice-principals work through the cultural support workers and will tell the cultural support worker to phone that parent and to explain that situation in a culturally appropriate way. (administrators, p. 22, 1460-1470)

Part of working through situations in a culturally appropriate way is also finding appropriate support services for the youth who are involved in unacceptable behaviours. It is essential to call attention to the central belief underpinning these support services. As administrator1 makes clear, youth are held accountable for their behaviours. Having a support system in place, such as cultural support worker advocacy, does not mean the youth are without responsibility. Rather, the idea is that youth are held responsible for their actions, while at the same time are being provided with cultural support. This is an important counter to the myths and stereotypes of ‘special privileges’. As this administrator explains, “this isn’t as someone said, a get-out-of-jail-free. Not at all. We help our kids be accountable and we understand there are ways in which to do that and it’s not in isolation” (p. 22, 1477-1482). Again, we can see from the administrator’s words that the underlying support provided to the youth is the knowledge that they will never be alone. Youth are responsible for their decisions, but there are supports in place, and youth have a safe place to be. At the end of the day, youth are still valued as the good people they are, a message that is integral in supporting positive youth identity and self-concept.

Another important role the cultural support workers take up is that of advocate with teachers. The students we spoke with informed us that they rely on cultural support worker support in order to navigate relationships with some of their teachers. For example, one

young woman shares that in the past the cultural support workers had spoken to teachers on her behalf in order to help settle tensions that were developing. She says,

Well, I have always been a pretty good student but, like, if I have problems with my teachers, and they are not treating me fairly, or if they did something and I didn't like it, I could tell our cultural support worker about it and the cultural support worker will talk to the teacher for me and settle any problems that we have. And I think that helps 'cause, like, sometimes last year I didn't want to go back to some of my classes, because the way some of my teachers treated me. (young woman3, p. 3, 204-215)

The other youth we spoke with also related their appreciation, knowing that if need be the cultural support workers will advocate for them. This advocacy work is being done in order to interrupt the cycle of disengagement that is such a familiar experience for many Aboriginal youth who participate in the public school system. Such advocacy and intervention helps youth to remain in the classroom and engaged with the school system. Rather than simply not going to class, at this school, students are reaching out to their cultural support worker so that tensions with teachers can be alleviated. Young man3 shares that sometimes tensions arise out of a perceived lack of respect for students; it is challenging for youth to respect teachers whom they do not feel are respecting them. As he describes, "respect goes both ways, and I know because I have had a lot of teachers that, for the first while, I keep trying to respect them, but they refuse to give me any respect whatsoever, and that is kind of annoying" (p. 32, 2203- 2209).

The cultural support workers, too, speak of their advocacy role. We were told that, daily, cultural support workers act as buffers between students and teachers, often speaking with teachers to see what can be done to smooth over situations that sometimes arise. The cultural support workers share that their engagements with teachers stem from multiple reasons. Perhaps there was a disagreement in the classroom, but perhaps it might have

nothing to do with what is going on in classroom. Maybe a student is having a hard time that day due to issues outside of school.

Cultural support workers make possible a smoother transition from the classroom to the *NYA WEH Program* room which, on some days, is necessary for the youth. As cultural support worker² shares, advocacy at times involves daily negotiations between students and teachers. He tells us,

There is the not seeing eye-to-eye and having a little argument where the teacher maybe is not understanding what is going on, and maybe there is something going on at home, where the student doesn't feel comfortable, let alone going to class and having to speak about it. It happens daily, let's say a student had to stamp all their work and say mom or dad lost their job, and they have to get a part-time job, or even a full-time job during the day where they are not coming to school for a month. So now what we would do is go and see is there any way that we can get this credit. Is there any way that we can salvage this? What can we do about it? You know, if she does so many activities is it possible to get this credit? And a lot of the times the teacher will accommodate the students. (p. 10, 677-708)

These non-confrontational interventions are of great value to youth and, as we can see, are required for multiple reasons ranging from student-teacher arguments to students being unable to attend school due to work needs. This is a reality that is not often realized in public school settings. Due to the economic conditions many Aboriginal families experience, some youth are at times required to work during the day to earn money. As cultural support worker¹ makes clear, in order to support Aboriginal youth, it is extremely important to really know what the youth are experiencing. As he shares, understanding is not just about having read about people in a book, it's about fully understanding youth's daily realities,

I always think back to that movie, *Good Will Hunting*, where they are sitting around and he says 'do you think I know what your life was like because I read a book about *Oliver Twist*?' Or you know, things like that. You have to really, really know what these kids are coming from, and the experiences they had. They are not going to tell you, or whatever, but you have to know. (p. 16, 1065-1075)

The cultural support workers also share that often youth come to speak with them because they are the ones who know what is going on in the youths' lives. Cultural support worker1 explains these profound relationships,

And it's not even that we are just advocating because they in trouble or something like that, they could be having a problem and they don't feel comfortable speaking to a non-Aboriginal teacher about what is going on in their lives or they want to talk to someone that knows them, really, really knows who they are and not just on a cultural level just knows their family life, knows their background, knows what's been going on with them for the past couple months and doesn't want to explain it again to a teacher. (p. 13, 849-854)

A vital learning from this research is that the relationships between the cultural support workers and the *NYA WEH* youth have a profound impact on student engagement. These intimate relationships are significantly different from relationships commonly developed within the education system. Without these personal relationships and cultural support worker interventions, one can easily imagine the outcomes. Studies show, for example, that teacher-student tension is a leading cause for student disengagement. Through cultural support worker advocacy, youth gain confidence that they have allies within the public school system.

Bringing in the family: Building relationships with the NYA WEH* parents.

The cultural support workers share with us that frequently they are also involved in the home lives of *NYA WEH* youth and that they have developed positive relationships with students' families. The cultural support workers share examples of their involvement with the *NYA WEH* youth outside of school. For instance, at times even if something happened outside of school, youth would come to the cultural support workers for help. The cultural

support worker would then contact the parents and begin to dialogue about the incident. The families and cultural support workers would, then, begin to work through the situation together. Another way they are involved is when parents come to the school. The cultural support workers shared an example of a parent who has been coming to the school daily in order to speak with the cultural support workers about her child's absenteeism. Together, mom, cultural support workers and student, developed a plan of action to support the student.

Sometimes, cultural support workers would advocate at home for students by calling home and explaining what happened at school; for example why a youth was suspended and the steps needed in order to help the youth to move forward. Other times, they would go to the youth's house to pick them up and drive them to events or parents will come to the school to participate in Feasts. As one of the cultural support workers says, they share an intimate relationship with the parents of the students in the *NYA WEH Program*, a relationship that is quite different from the relationships that usually are developed at school (p. 11, 744-782). For example, parents and cultural support workers are even on a first name basis. One of the teachers we spoke with also comments on all of these multiple functions of the cultural support workers. As teacher2 shares,

Cultural support worker1 and cultural support worker2, they really, really, fulfill an important need in the school. And they seem to be a very, very, important go between, not only with other teachers that students are having a problem with, but again bringing the family into it. They are calling home a lot of times and they know the different situations of a lot of these students, and that is where a lot of contact is made, bringing parents in as well. So they're talking to parents, they are also talking to the teachers looking after them. I mean, they really fill an important role for these Aboriginal students. (p. 10, 639-654)

Given the history of Aboriginal education, and the significantly powerful impacts of residential schools, Aboriginal parents tend not to be involved with the education system. We wondered, however, if the positive relationships that were developing between parents and

cultural support workers at this school led to an increased parental involvement in their children's education. The young women and men tell us that since they joined the *NYA WEH Program*, their parents have been more involved in their education. For example, one young woman tells us that before she came to this high school and joined the *NYA WEH Program* her parents were not really involved in schooling. She explains,

They didn't really have any programs like this. It was just kind of like teacher's nights, and whatever. So I just never bothered telling my Dad. But now with the Feasts...I think that is like, interesting to being my family to that. I have, like a six year old brother, who doesn't really know anything yet, so it's good to bring him to that. (p. 9, 556- 565)

This young woman further explains to us that parental involvement started once the cultural support workers and her dad began to develop a personal relationship. As she acknowledges, her dad, first, began talking to the cultural workers in order to see how she was doing in school. He now comes to the school to attend Feasts and other *NYA WEH Program* events (p. 8, 521-527). Informal relationship-building has also grown between another young woman's mother and the cultural support workers. As this young woman explained, the relationship started from a distance, with her mother and the cultural support workers talking on the phone as they worked to develop a plan to encourage this young woman to not skip classes. Her mom, now, comes to the school and supports various *NYA WEH* activities. Young man⁵ also tells us that his parent will come to Feasts to watch him drum (p. 12, 825-827). We wondered, too, if the youth were sharing what they were learning with their families. We asked them "Do you talk about the program, the elders or teachers or any of this stuff with your family?" Young man³ tells us that he does share what he is learning, as he says, "well, both of my parents are extremely interested in that sort of stuff" (p. 13, 853-859). This is a powerful example of knowledge sharing. As youth learn about their cultures and traditions,

they bring that knowledge out of the classroom and home to their families and communities. In this way, we can see how youth are actively working to fill the cultural knowledge deficit that has developed in Aboriginal communities!

Explaining how parents are becoming more connected to the public school system, teacher1 describes how parents engage with their children's education in indirect ways: they are not attending parents' nights but, rather, are coming out to Feasts, and drumming performances. They are engaging with education, through culture.

We are, around the peripheral, as part of the Feast or if we have any kind of drum stuff going on, or performances, they are usually there in support of and wanting to be videoing it. At academic parent's night that we have twice a year, I see no Aboriginal parents. (p. 9, 583 -590)

This quotation illustrates the ways in which parents and family are increasingly beginning to re-engage with the public school system. Again, given the history of Aboriginal education, it is not surprising that involvement occurs around the margins, not at the center or in mainstream teacher-centered ways, but in student-centered, community-centered, and culturally-centered ways. The *NYA WEH Program* thus re-invents connections in exactly the areas where residential schools tried to sever them; between home and school, between culture and school, and between parent and school. Power arrangements are reversed as the values promoted through residential schools are challenged. Re-imagining education, the *NYA WEH Program* interrupts the inter-generational effects of residential schools by building Indigenous-centered connections that make students and their families feel good and grounded in their own histories, traditions, spirituality and culture.

We care about all people⁴¹: Building relationships with non-Aboriginal youth.

It was apparent to our team that there was a growing Aboriginal presence at the school. We were curious to know if this presence had an impact on school culture. The cultural support workers work in culturally grounded ways to develop solid, trusting relationships with the youth in the *NYA WEH Program* and their families. Relationship work occurs not only there, however. Cultural support workers also build positive relationships with non-Aboriginal youth at the school. We asked the *NYA WEH* community about school culture because we were curious to learn what impact the program might have on the rest of the school. Was the *NYA WEH Program* ghettoized, disconnected from the rest of the school, or was the program spreading Indigenous culture throughout the school?

One of the ways in which we could see the program extending outside of the *NYA WEH* community and into the rest of the school was through some non-Aboriginal student participation in various components of the *NYA WEH Program*. These experiences helped to build positive school culture as, through their participation, non-Aboriginal youth were learning more about Aboriginal Peoples (young women, p. 11, 695-707). As young woman1 accounts, “we have lots of friends that are not part of the *NYA WEH Program*. We become friends with everyone I guess. It’s a good environment” (p. 10, 684-687). Teacher1 shares that quite a few non-Aboriginal students take the Native Arts classes. Teacher2 also describes the positive relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth who participate in the Native Studies classes (p. 12, 769-778). Young woman3 and young woman4 also comment on their relationships with non-*NYA WEH* youth at this school. They observe the open door atmosphere of the program, and share that many non-Aboriginal youth

⁴¹ (cultural support worker1, p. 24, 1598-1599).

come into the *NYA WEH* room and have the chance to see what is going on and to participate (young women, p. 9, 587-593). Teacher1 also communicates that non-Aboriginal youth access the *NYA WEH* room, “In fact, a lot of non-Native kids use the *NYA WEH* room, because it is kind of a friendly place to be” (p. 12, 823-826).

This theme was echoed by everyone with whom we spoke. At this school, it is common for non-Aboriginal youth to be interested in the *NYA WEH Program* and to wish to participate in some way. One young Aboriginal man even told us that his friends wished that they were Native (p. 27, 1859-1860). I remember wondering when I heard this youth’s perspective, if perhaps this same sentiment was being expressed by other non-Aboriginal students. Cultural support worker1 indicates that indeed this sentiment is quite common at the school. Many non-Aboriginal youth are expressing that they ‘wished they were Aboriginal’. He tells us,

We have all kinds of kids going to the administrators and saying, how can I be Aboriginal? They are. And they ask that question because they see all of the good things that are happening, and all of the things that we are doing. And there are kids that come up and say, how can I be Aboriginal? (p. 24, 1628-1635)

These affirmative connections help to contribute to what the *NYA WEH* youth describe as a good environment and positive school culture. They also share with us that they have lots of friends at the school who are non-Aboriginal. Teacher2 highlights the multiple cross-cultural relationships at the school, and the cultural impact the *NYA WEH Program* is having on the school as a whole,

I wouldn’t say it is so ghettoized. A lot of the students are aware of it in the school and a lot of the Aboriginal students here have friends outside of their own culture, so other students know about it and they know about the [*NYA WEH*] room and the program and different ongoing things that are run in the school. It has become part of the school culture. (p. 2, 107-116)

And so, interestingly, and importantly, the program is not deemed to be a ghetto within the school, nor is it something that is just for Aboriginal students. Non-aboriginal youth at the school can, and do, access the program, either by taking Native Arts classes or by spending time in the *NYA WEH* room. The teachers put forward an explanation regarding the culture at the school,

Teacher1 - Well I think that within the confines of this building, it is cool to be Aboriginal. And that is the perception of the entire population. It has taken some time I think, and it has just been through events that have been presented, where everyone gets to come and everybody gets to see, and everybody gets to play.

Teacher2 - It is such a multi-cultural school. I mean, you go to other schools where it's maybe, 99% of the schools population is white, right, and this here is much less. There are so many cultures, so many countries represented, that it is part of the school culture. (p. 12, 789-806)

These teachers make the important observation that at this school, it is cool to be Aboriginal! Students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, want to be part of what is going on, and I wondered if this could be understood as stemming from the underlying school culture of acceptance and diversity. One of the young students we spoke with also commented on the exceptionally high levels of acceptance at the school. He shares his observations regarding what he describes as extremely low aggression levels at this school. He says,

Young man3 - I actually noticed that the aggression within this school is extremely low compared to most of the schools that I been to.

Research Team - Why do you think that is?

Young Man3 - I don't know... something in the air....

Research Team - It's magic air, because it is a way diverse school and there are tons of different people here and you would think that people would sort of be rubbing up against one another periodically.

Young Man3 - Most of the other places that I been to, where there was a lot less, as opposed to broadness with religions, there were fights non-stop. Like at my old school there was one, at least everyday one fight.

Research Team - And it is different here?

Young man3 - Yeah, I don't know why though. (p. 30, 2003-2029)

We can surmise from a reflection like this, and from comments such as non-Aboriginal youth wishing they were Aboriginal, that there appears to be much less racism in this high school than is commonly experienced across many other high schools in Ontario. When we asked the *NYA WEH* teachers about this, they agreed that, indeed, there was much less racism at this school (p. 12, 780-787). Cultural support worker2 echoes these thoughts, telling us that although there may be “a few bad apples”, he definitely thinks the *NYA WEH Program* is part of the school culture. He maintains that students from all different cultural backgrounds want to be part of the group, and some even come on Aboriginal culturally specific field trips with the *NYA WEH Program*. Cultural support worker1 adds, “I think that it is included, because we do stuff. We open the talent show and we have pretty much all of our functions here, like our Feasts and those things...” (p. 23, 1554-1558). As cultural support worker2 further portrays,

I would definitely say its part of the school culture....We get students from Muslim students, to Asian students, we get students from Africa that want to learn and that want to be a part of the group. Some of them want to, you know, we went to Crawford Lake and there was a Muslim student who was just intrigued with program and there are the supports there for him - he wanted to learn about the old village and how our beliefs were. (p. 24, 1602-1616)

Overall, we were provided with various representations of positive school culture and positive relationships. For example, the principal told us that the population at this school is

extremely culturally diverse. Youth from a multitude of various ethnic backgrounds attend the school, including refugees from all over the world. Describing further the cultural diversity at this school, the principal says,

This school has a very large ESL department. Six to eight ESL teachers and we run ESL congregated programs in thirty different classes...And you have to understand that each wave of refugees that hits our city, our teachers would have experience with. So first there was the Vietnamese, and then there was Albanians, and the Kosovars, the Romas. The latest has been the Somalis...I always used to joke and say look and see where there is strife in the world and a year from now we will be dealing with that population...So the staff is very well adept at examining the cultural values and the language and the socio-economic happenstance of any cultural group that enters the halls and in any great strength. (administrators, p. 6, 375-400)

And although the staff is predominantly white and of Euro-Canadian origins, teachers and administrators are experienced in working with students from various cultural backgrounds and are trained in meeting diverse student needs. However, the mere fact of ethno-cultural diversity does not, in and of itself, challenge racism or white supremacy. Simply affirming diversity without challenging racial hierarchies can entrench racism. The *NYA WEH Program*, however, reverses historical power arrangements and the school earmarks significant resources in support of this (bottom up, student-centered, innovative curriculum and arts, field trips, food, music, community involvement). The school publicly values these students and the *NYA WEH Program* through its sharing of power and resources. Such practices do challenge systemic racism, as it reverses the general organization of power in the broader society.

Interestingly, when we spoke with the young women about school culture, their insights helped to illuminate the complexities of relationship-building. When we asked these thoughtful young women whether or not the *NYA WEH Program* has an impact on the rest of the school, they brought to our awareness the fact that, to their perceptions, the program may

not have an impact on *all* the students at the school. The women articulate that some youth at the school still do not know about the *NYA WEH Program*, while others may not really care about Aboriginal issues. As the following indicates, they share that they do not believe that the program has an impact on all students at the school,

Young woman3 - I think it only has an impact on the people that really care. Lots of people don't really care about it at all.

Young woman5 - Like today, this guy we were talking about the *NYA WEH* room and he was like "oh, what is the *NYA WEH* room?" And we were like, you don't know about the *NYA WEH* room? I was kind of surprised that he didn't know about it, but then again, I don't know.... (p. 9, 619-630)

A young man also discusses some non-Aboriginal student resistance when it comes to connecting with the *NYA WEH Program*. Specifically, this student shares his experience with another student at the school whom he believes was nervous to come to the *NYA WEH Program* room. He explains,

Young man2 - Well, I met a girl the other day, and I asked her to come up and she said she was nervous, and I was like, it's a program for everybody, not just Natives can go there. It's for everybody.

Research Team - Did she come up?

Young man2 - No, it's like, they get nervous or something.... (p. 27, 1848-1857)

These young people illuminate some of the underlying tensions at this school regarding notions of cross-cultural acceptance, tolerance and diversity. It is noteworthy that when speaking to the youth, there were also other instances of tensions that arose during discussions around school culture. For example, although teachers described the respect given to Aboriginal students, one young woman we spoke with made a different observation. Young woman3, for instance, claims that even though

all the students are told to stand to honour Aboriginal drumming, some of the students at the school choose not to. She says, “And then there is like, when they are told to stand to end the talent show for the honour song, some of the kids don’t stand, which kind of makes me mad sometimes” (p. 9, 632-636). Evidently, there are still some tensions to navigate in the ongoing effort to construct a positive school culture respectful of cultural differences. Student observations that the program only has an impact on those who care, and that some non-Aboriginal students are intimidated and feel hesitant to get involved with the *NYA WEH Program*, while others are outright disrespectful, are important to note as they can be useful entry points when continuing to develop a respectful school culture.

In trying to uncover other possible tensions, we asked the *NYA WEH* community if having a program specifically for Aboriginal students causes some level of resentment from the other students at the school. When we spoke with the administration they shared with us the tensions with having a cultural support program for Aboriginal youth. Just as the youth shared, the administrators explained that tensions do exist and that these tensions revolved around non-Aboriginal students wishing to have similar support services available to them as well. Although non-Aboriginal youth at the school apparently use the language of ‘wishing to become Aboriginal’, it can be interpreted that what the youth are really looking for is access to support services such as those supports available through the *NYA WEH Program*.

Acknowledging this desire, the principal expresses,

The tension was kids knocking on the door saying “what do I have to do to be Aboriginal?” because the kids here were getting so many perks. We were taking them to the Toronto Pow-Wow, they would have food in their room all of the time, to build that sense of community we always have food for them. That is how they would be attracted to the program and attracted to the room. So pretty soon kids would look around who weren’t Aboriginal and say you know so how do I access this program, what do you want me to do, how do I become Aboriginal? (administrators, p. 7, 454-468).

How, our research team wondered, did the administrators respond to students who asked these questions. As administrator2 articulates, “we said, if you want to participate in the program, go ahead” (p. 7, 474-475).

It important to the administrators that non-Aboriginal youth had an opportunity to learn and participate in Aboriginal culture. The involvement of non-Aboriginal students was also seen as a learning opportunity for Aboriginal youth. *NYA WEH* youth were encouraged to take these opportunities to share their program and to build relationships with fellow students at their school. Students were encouraged to bring their friends into the classroom and build cross-cultural relationship. They were also encouraged to be proud and have respect for their room, and to not worry because the cultural support workers will always be there to support them. As administrator1 shares,

So there is an understanding and a pride I think that came out of that. It’s like “this is our room, and these are our things, and we are prepared to share them with you, but there has to be respect”. I think that in itself was an underlying teaching that was new to some of the students in there, even some of our own students to have. Some of them have never had anything to be proud of, or to care for, even caring for their room...so we are asking them to step a little bit outside of their comfort zone but their cultural support worker was always there to mentor them.... (p. 7, 477-508)

As one of the cultural support workers explains, non-Aboriginal youth are welcome in the *NYA WEH* room, as long as they follow the rules for the room. He^s identifies “I have basic rules in the room and that is, you respect the room, me and the guys that work here, and you can hang out” (p. 23, 1567-1573).

The cultural support workers, too, provide insight regarding tensions or resistance that might exist towards the *NYA WEH Program*. Cultural support worker1 insightfully identifies these tensions and the ways in which the cultural support workers try to support non-Aboriginal youth at the school. As he articulates in this powerful quotation below, although there is the possibility for

some non-Aboriginal students to feel jealous or resentful, the cultural support workers try to combat those feelings by constructing a welcoming environment for all the youth who come to the *NYA WEH Program* room. Cultural support worker1 says, “well, I think it is accepted to a certain extent. Like, how much can you give one culture before another one becomes jealous or resentful (p. 23, 1551-1554)? Sharing the way they try to balance those tensions, the cultural support workers explain that yes, this is a program designed to support Aboriginal youth at the school. However, they recognize that lots of students at the school need support, too, so they do help non-Aboriginal youth as well. Sharing bus tickets and food, the cultural support workers demonstrate that they care for all kids, not just the Aboriginal students in the *NYA WEH Program*. In this way the cultural support workers operate from a place centered in the cultural value of sharing. In so doing, they also help to mitigate tensions. Cultural support worker1 explicates,

We also help out the kids who are not Aboriginal. We are here to help our Aboriginal kids, but you know, how can you turn someone away that is asking for your help too? ...we have made friends with other students that needed help, we have done favours and I think because we have done those things, we as a whole, have reached out to other kids and helped other kids. Whether it is they will come in after lunch and say, “is there any food left over, can I have something to eat?” Sure. So it doesn’t get out of control, where there is a line up at the door. Or shooting a kid a couple of bus tickets ‘cause I don’t have a way to get home today. Sure. And because we have done that, we have kind of shown that it is not just for Aboriginal kids. Well, not that it’s just for Aboriginal kids, but we are here, and we are caring people, and we care about all people, and not just Aboriginal kids. (p. 23, 1573-1600)

Although the *NYA WEH Program* is a special tool meant to support Aboriginal youth at the school, non-Aboriginal youth are not turned away when they come for help. Through these actions, they clearly illustrate their desire to help all youth, not just Aboriginal youth. Sharing an example of a situation where he was able to support a non-Aboriginal youth at the school and also raise awareness about Aboriginal culture, cultural support worker1 remembers,

We just had the feast from the night before, and I was reheating some corn soup up for the next day and she [non-Aboriginal student] was like, what is that? And I said, it's corn soup. And she is obviously from Africa, so she is used to eating exotic dishes, and she is like, let me try, and I told her, if I let you try it, you have to eat it- the whole bowl. And she was like, alright. And she sat there and she ate it and said, wow this is great! And I told her that it is a traditional soup, and you have experienced Aboriginal culture today. And she thought that was amazing. (p. 23, 1546-1661)

Summarizing his view of the *NYA WEH* room and the *NYA WEH Program*, cultural support worker¹ tell us that the way he sees it, this is a special tool designed to support the needs of Aboriginal youth. As he says,

I don't think of it as a ghetto, I think of it as a safe place. I think of it as just a tool, let's say. A tool to become more successful. We have our room in the school, and that is a special thing. That is something that some of the other kids don't get to do. (p. 23, 1559-1562)

I was curious how the cultural support workers were able to manage that difference. Here, at this school, there is an Aboriginal cultural support program which consists of a cultural room which can be accessed by youth throughout the day. This program provides counselling services, advocacy, Native Studies classes, transportation, food and clothing, all sorts of supports designed to support Aboriginal youth. Furthermore, the *NYA WEH Program* strives to become inclusive by providing some 'perks' such as cultural field trips, access to the *NYA WEH* room, gratuitous bus tickets and food, to the school's non-Aboriginal population. Although this can be understood as inclusive, non-Aboriginal youth are still guests of the *NYA WEH Program*. The *NYA WEH* room is not theirs, it is an Indigenous space. It is a sovereign space run by and for Aboriginal Peoples. I wondered, given these differences, did non-Aboriginal youth ask where is our room? Where is our space? Our program? And where are our cultural support workers? Was this an issue I wondered? What we discovered was that another way that diversity and equity is managed at the school is through the programs and activities that are available for the other cultures at the school. For

instance, Teacher1 and Teacher 2 discuss how there are other events at the school that include various cultural communities. These components help to interrupt potential feelings of inequity. As they explain,

Teacher2 - But then again, there are other programs and activities put aside for other cultures as well. Like we have Muslim prayer every Friday, so for Muslim students they go, and there are different cultural events for different ethnicities. There is the Eid for the Muslim feast as well.

Teacher1 - Yeah, so there are other events within the school that include the community.

Teacher2 - I think that does help too, so that it's not just Aboriginal students getting all this "so called extra". All cultures are looked upon. (p. 12, 761-844)

And so it appears that the school is working to navigate its way through various questions of equity. By choosing to meet the needs of groups in fair and equitable ways rather than focusing on treating each cultural group in the same way, the various communities at the school are supported. This approach is especially important when dealing with groups who are disadvantaged. However, the program is not always perceived as equitable; as we learned at the Wildfire Gatherings, the *NYA WEH Program* does experience some resistance from teachers and administration at the school.

Changing the way that people are thinking⁴²: Relationships with teachers and administrators.

Whenever new program directions are introduced into a school environment, the potential exists for tensions and resistance to arise within existing staff. In context of the *NYA WEH Program*, we wondered if there were tensions from the teachers and administration when the program was first introduced. We asked the principal whether, in

⁴² (cultural support workers, p. 13, 849-850).

this instance, such had occurred. His feeling was that although to some degree tensions had occurred, they arose, not from prejudice or racial bias, but rather from a perceived need for equity. As the principal reasons, teachers' resistance to the *NYA WEH Program* came from perceived threat to the culture of "equality" that had been constructed at the school.

In trying to make sense of the multiple narratives regarding school culture, it appears that tensions arose because some of the teachers and administrators felt that by providing something different to the Aboriginal youth at the school, the culture of "equality" that was the school's focus would be eliminated, reduced or impacted. The line of reasoning was that if one group at the school were to receive more or different treatment, it would not be seen as fair and equitable to all students at the school. From this perspective, some teachers and administrators were concerned that it would not be fair to provide particular and additional resources to some of the youth at the school and not all of the youth at the school. This concern, at times, led to resistance. As teacher1 summarizes,

It depends on the teacher, but some teachers seem a little resistant with the way that they treat the Aboriginal learner, and some teachers are a lot more supportive. I think that the teachers that are not quite as supportive sometimes don't, how can I put this...they may not like certain concessions that some of the Aboriginal students are given. And they think, that is unfair, you know, they should be treated just like every other student. So when they see that, they are like, oh why does this student get to do this, or get to do that, and get away with this, when the other students couldn't. So that sometimes raise a cause for a little bit of friction or resistance. But from that, most teachers are supportive. (p. 4, 226-245)

One particular area of resistance described to our research team was teacher resistance to students accessing the *NYA WEH* room. Young woman5 tells us that she goes down to the *NYA WEH* room when she is not comfortable in her other classrooms. Young woman4, however, tells us that often times, she is not permitted to access the *NYA WEH* room. The

following brief dialogue highlights the resistance students at times experience when they try to access the *NYA WEH* room,

- Young woman4 - Half the time I ask to go to the Native room half of my teachers won't even let me, because they just think that people don't do any work down there and they just do whatever.
- Young woman3 - Yeah, like this one teacher called it the party room....lots of teachers, not all of them, like some of them are pretty understanding, like there are lots of teachers that will let us come down here in an instant and then there are teachers that will give you the biggest problem and you will have to get the principal to talk to them and stuff like that.
- Research team - Why do you think that is?
- Young woman3 - They have their own perception, they don't come or they are not there all the time.
- Young woman4 - Yeah, they just see what they see. But if they were to sit in there and actually be in there, then they would probably have a different perspective. (p.4, 257-291).

When we spoke with the young men about accessing the *NYA WEH* room during their other classes, the young men shared similar experiences of teacher resistance.

- Young man5 - And a couple of teachers won't let me go.
- Young man1 - Well, when they walk by sometimes, they see people fooling around, and they think we are just going there to fool around. And it is just the odd time that they walk by, and they see people fooling around, so when we ask to go down there they think we are fooling around.
- Young man5 - And it is usually at lunch time when they walk by.
- Research team - So, they don't see it as academically important?
- Young man1 - Yeah, they think that we are going there to fool around, lay down and get juice and that, but...
- Research team - But that is not what you are doing?
- Young man1 - No. (p. 11, 737-766)

Clearly, some teachers hold misconceptions about the *NYA WEH* room and do not realize the benefits the room and the program provide to Aboriginal youth. Cultural support worker1 identifies their role in advocating for student access to the *NYA WEH* room. As he describes,

I would say that it happens fairly often, a daily basis. Either a student is having a bad day and wants to get out of class and the teacher isn't allowing her to, so the student takes off and comes down to the room. So what I will do is, I will go upstairs and speak with the teacher, you know, is it possible to get the work for her? You know, she is not having a good day, is it okay if she comes down and works in our room? (p. 10, 666-677)

Another significant area of resistance emerges from office administration.

Commonly, bureaucracy interferes with necessary educational practices. One such bureaucratic practice is the issuing of timetables. Regularly, students must make an appointment for a request for a timetable change. Often, however, it may take a week or so for an appointment time. Such a time delay is impractical for Aboriginal students. As cultural support worker1 identifies, "the kid might not be here in a week, because if you make them wait a week they will probably say, screw this, and they will be lost" (p. 12, 800-846).

Another bureaucratic practice is the requirement of \$25 for a timetable to be issued.

Although these funds go to the school and are meant to support the yearbook and other items, this, too, is an impractical requirement for Aboriginal students. As cultural support worker1 explains, if students are unable to afford the \$25 fee, or if, for example, there is a fee for an outstanding library book students will be prevented from getting their timetable. A third bureaucratic issue is the power of the office staff. Normally, there is a protocol established for how the rest of the staff will deal with office staff. Cultural support workers, however, have been given *carte blanche* by the principal to do what ever they need to do to support youth. As we are told, "we always have the support of principal, no matter what ... The principal gives me, cultural support worker3 and cultural support worker2 *carte*

blanche to do pretty much whatever we want to do” (cultural support worker1, p. 12, 800-846). As such, the cultural support workers, rather than waiting on office staff and bureaucracy, simply walk right into the office, pull student timetables and make the necessary changes. Keeping the ball rolling, cultural support workers do this because they recognize that they need to act while youth are engaged and cannot allow barriers like time or resources to prevent students from modifying their timetables. Cultural support worker1 further describes, however, that this practice causes great friction with the office staff. As he reflects,

The office staff gets mad at me and will say, what are you doing? And I just say, my job - leave me alone, and I will tell them if they have a problem with it to go and talk to the principal because he is allowing me to do these things and there is a reason behind it. I’m not just favouring these kids. I’m just doing my job. (p. 12, 800-846)

The cultural support workers are provided with access to power and are able to do what needs to be done in order to best support the needs of the Aboriginal students at this school. And so they do, and by speeding up process and removing the requirement for money, the cultural support workers keep youth in school and going to their classes. As cultural support worker1 makes clear, their job is to ensure that students can start to go to class straight away.

The problem, though, is that the cultural support workers are really only able to do all this because of the overwhelming support of the principal. The principal is on-board and fully supports the *NYA WEH Program*. He has confidence in the cultural support workers and is not willing to let bureaucratic practices interrupt student engagement. This strong senior administrative support is imperative for the smooth running of the program and leaves the cultural support workers wondering, would the program flourish and meet the needs of youth, if this support were removed? Cultural support worker1 tells us, that in the back of

their minds there is the fear of what will happen to the scope of their agency if the principal were to leave the school. As he shares, “And I always fear the day that the principal leaves here” (p. 12, 800-846). This is a very important insight and a significant issue, because during the writing of this thesis, the principal has indeed been transferred to another public school. Although I am unable to make any conclusions regarding the impact of his transfer, and I do not know if the daily operations of the *NYA WEH Program* have in fact been effected since this senior administration change, I do suggest that this, indeed, is an important area for future research.

These examples illuminate the multiple ways in which cultural support workers advocate for the *NYA WEH* youth. Even though the cultural support workers experience resistance from staff, they, tirelessly, commit to placing the interest of the student above all else. In this way, youth are able to more easily navigate their way through the school system. What this occurrence also illuminates is the importance of cultural support workers having access to power. In this particular case, the principal is one of the driving forces behind the smooth flow of the program, providing the cultural support workers with power to do whatever needs to be done to support Aboriginal youth. It is important to discern, however, that this is not secured access to power, but rather hinges on this particular principal’s desire to maintain the success of the *NYA WEH Program*.

As with any other program, success of the *NYA WEH Program* will only be maintained if the person at the top, the principal, is seen as being highly supportive of it. Regardless of how committed the cultural support workers are to the *NYA WEH Program*, their power is given to them by the principal. That is why they would fear change in senior administration which might lead to cultural support workers not being able to continue doing

what they do to make the program work. To help mitigate this tentative practice, from the onset the cultural support workers were positioned to the staff as central and all-important to the program. As the principal informed us, the program was set up in such a way that the cultural support workers were to be the primary contact for staff members. If any staff member had a question about the program, or if they had any problems with an Aboriginal student, staff members were directed to contact the cultural support workers (administrators, p. 21, 1435-1444). Notably, this message was not presented to the school staff by the principal, but by the coordinating cultural support worker himself. In this way, we can see how the cultural support workers' position is elevated from the start.

Encountering discourses of liberal multiculturalism.

As I contemplate these narratives, I wonder if teacher / administrator resistance stems from a commitment to liberal multiculturalism. Liberal discourses are concerned with notions of equality, fairness, tolerance, and acceptance among individuals, and take up sameness/difference in particular ways. In discourses supporting liberal multiculturalism there is an emphasis on shared humanity, while difference is only slightly attended to. Liberal multiculturalism extends this to ethno-cultural minorities. For example, although minority group differences are 'tolerated' and 'accepted' in as much as diverse cultural practices, in liberal multiculturalism, there is a lack of attention to power differences between minorities and the dominant cultural group. There are multiple critiques of multiculturalism from people of colour who argue that such discourses are colour-blind, gender-blind, class-blind, etc. In effect, these discourses of multiculturalism ignore issues of power and privilege while simultaneously reproducing and re-entrenching European/ Western hegemony (Orlowski,

2008). Furthermore, discourses of liberal multiculturalism are critiqued for erasing colonial histories here and elsewhere, and for taking the white Euro-culture as the norm and value-neutral.

I wonder what the underlying assumptions were when the HWDSB chose to establish the *NYA WEH Program* at this school. What was the reasoning behind this decision? As mentioned earlier, at Sir John A. Macdonald there are youth from over 80 countries speaking over 40 languages. As the principal puts forward,

You have to understand, the reason that [this school] was chosen to accept this program was because of its cultural diversity in the first place ... the whole idea of this school is that it is multicultural, and it is accepting, and it is tolerant. (administrators, p. 6, 371-374; 406-409)

It appears that when the *NYA WEH Program* was first introduced to school staff, it was presented through the language of liberal multiculturalism. The principal tells us that from the onset, this program was presented as just another cultural program being offered at the school. As he communicates,

So when we introduced the program, that was simply another cultural program, albeit the First Nations, the first culture of Canada. And it was okay, here is the deal, here are the cultural values of these people, the smudging, the drumming and these are the things that you are going to see and here are the characteristics of their learning...so it was just another stream of refugees, but they weren't, they were our First Peoples. So that is why it worked. (administrators, p. 6, 409-418, 445-448)

When analyzing this message, it appears as though the principal is presenting a message of "sameness", contending that the *NYA WEH Program* is just a continuation of an established school culture of acceptance and diversity in a liberal multicultural framework. Through a discourse of liberal multiculturalism, the principal introduces the *NYA WEH Program* in such a way that the program enhances the school's existing commitment to meet the needs of its

diverse student body⁴³. What is important to observe is that the principal contends that it was this approach that helped to successfully establish the *NYA WEH Program* in the school. As the principal further explains in the following quotation, a school culture was already established at this high school that revolved around values of tolerance and inclusion in a multicultural nation – Canada’s official multicultural position. As he acknowledges,

...and we have a plan that assimilates. I know assimilate is a bad word around the Aboriginal table, but it assimilates them into our community. Not a white community, but assimilates them into a multi-cultural community. So the whole idea of this school is that it is multicultural, and it is accepting, and it is tolerant. (administrators, p. 6, 400-409)

I cannot help but note that the language he uses “simply another cultural program”, “just another stream of refugees”, “assimilates them into a multi-cultural community”, is in tension with an Indigenous politic of sovereignty and Self-determination. As Mattson and Caffrey (2001) articulate, in this way, liberal multiculturalism thus serves to erase Canada’s colonial history. As they write,

Applying the concept of multiculturalism creates a situation in which Aboriginal peoples’ needs and aspirations are deemed to be the same as those of everyone else, thus avoiding the need to confront the history of colonialism. (p. 8)

Moreover, through such discourses, a backlash tends to emerge which positions dominant members of society as victims of multicultural policy (Orlowski, 2008). In the context of the school, the general assumption is that Aboriginal students should be treated the same as other students and not receiving ‘special treatment’. As noted earlier by teacher1, some teachers “may not like certain concessions that some of the Aboriginal students are given. And they

⁴³ For instance, the school provides resources and support for all of its students. Through the school-wide walk in closet and nutrition program, as well as the English as a Second Language classes, staff members are well versed in working to meet the diverse needs of the student body.

think, that is unfair, you know, they should be treated just like every other student” (p. 4, 226-245).

There are clear tensions between Indigenous discourses of Self-determination and liberal discourses of equality and multiculturalism. The latter, which focuses on notions of fairness, lacks a critical analysis of structural / institutional power imbalances and the historical and contemporary legacy of colonization - which makes Aboriginal Peoples not just another group in the multicultural mix. Keeping the focus off dominant culture, this discourse does not acknowledge that certain groups have gained privilege historically while other groups were historically marginalized. In the context of Aboriginal education, Mattson and Caffrey (2001) observe that liberal discourses marginalize Aboriginal Peoples by reducing their status. As they maintain, “policy and practice that is based on multiculturalism may further marginalize Aboriginal peoples, as it obscures the special status of Aboriginal Peoples as the original inhabitants of the land” (p. 8).

The principal is clearly a program champion. Is he using the hegemonic discourses of official multiculturalism strategically in order to navigate resistance the *NYA WEH Program* might encounter? I ask these questions in the context of earlier comments made by the principal. He mentioned that, after all these years, he now knows that walls can either be scaled or walked around (administrators, p. 27, 1850-1852). Is the principal co-opting language of the settler-state in order to walk around the wall? Does the principal, perhaps, recognize that defending the program through appeals to self-determination would provoke resistance? Does this approach help to facilitate acceptance or entrench colonial wrongs? The principal recalls, “I think I announced on the onset that I would be responsible for it [the program] so you don’t [mess] with the program, bring it to the principal” (administrators, p.

13, 885-888). Clearly, the principal is committed to the program's success, but without overtly positioning this program as stemming from Indigenous rights to Self-determination, I wonder if this approach further marginalizes Aboriginal Peoples.

Dominant public discourses about Aboriginal Peoples utilize notions of sameness, positing that Aboriginal Peoples should receive fair treatment. Yet, Aboriginal students remain at the absolute bottom of the educational spectrum. These liberal discourses, however, serve a political purpose. At the root of the matter, discourses of equality (sameness) work to obscure equity (true fairness). Moreover, the application of ideologies of equality reflects a lack of recognition of colonial history. Indigenous scholars argue that Aboriginal Peoples are not the same as other minority groups in Canada; rather, different histories, different sets of experiences, and different relationships with the nation-state position Aboriginal Peoples with different status. To challenge extreme historical marginalization, a program that provides more resources may be necessary to combat a historical legacy of exclusion. Because they fail to acknowledge this history and its effects, discourses of liberal multiculturalism can too easily be deployed against programs for redress, such as the *NYA WEH Program*. It is thus imperative that discourses of liberal multiculturalism be deconstructed. Identifying the need for settler society to be re-socialized in ways that do not re-marginalize Aboriginal Peoples, cultural support worker¹ offers,

Like I said, we have Feasts, we have all of those different things, but what it comes down to is we are trying to change the way the people are thinking. And the teachers in this school - and you have interviewed two of them, there are 95. So, are we changing the way some of them think? Maybe.... (p. 13, 847-855)

I flag this big thorny issue and identify it as an area for future research. I return to it briefly in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Conclusion.

One of the key factors in implementing a new program is its being accepted by institutions and people as a positive change in direction. Could the success of the *NYA WEH Program* also be due to top-down approach where it appears the principal is directive and ready to override teacher/administrator concerns and where he provides carte blanche to cultural support workers? What does this mean for the future of the program? What happens if champions (like the principal) leave? Are the cultural support workers correct to be concerned? Currently the principal and the cultural support workers have access to a lot of power which gets things done. Does the real potential exist, I wonder, for staff to become more resistant if incoming leadership is not on board with the program and reluctant to provide power to the cultural support workers?

This research indicates that the success of the *NYA WEH Program* seems to stem from a complex mix of teacher-driven curriculum development, a principal driven top-down approach to implementation where the principal is a key champion and advocate for program, and cultural support worker push for Aboriginal Self-determination. Will acceptance of the program continue without top-down strategic forcefulness? What happens when power relations shift? Will the program collapse or suffer?

One of the challenging questions provoked by this research is how justification of the program through discourses of liberal multiculturalism will affect its long-term viability and development. The fact that there was resistance is not unusual because often with new programs there is a fear of the unknown. Perhaps a perception of inequality, or a fear of loss of something that is already established for other groups will dissipate as more school staff members become involved in the *NYA WEH Program*. Not everyone has a heightened level

of awareness about what is needed for Aboriginal youth to be successful in the public education system. Furthermore, not everyone has a critical analysis of Aboriginal rights. There is the opportunity, therefore, that the *NYA WEH Program* might thus act as a site of teacher training, raising awareness of Canada's colonial history and Aboriginal Peoples' unique, sovereign relationship vis-à-vis the state. This is one domain of education that is not currently in place at Sir John A. Macdonald. My recommendation is that in-service teacher training would deconstruct 'special privilege' discourses that kick up in this context. I, furthermore, suggest that teacher training would position Aboriginal Peoples and Aboriginal education outside of the discourse of liberal multiculturalism. Such an approach to training would address systemic inequalities built into educational policy and could help to secure support for programs like the *NAY WEH Program* as liberal multiculturalism does not do justice to challenging racism, nor does it do justice to the history, and on-going impact, of colonialism.

Evidently, the *NYA WEH Program* has amazing infrastructure which is facilitated by and through the multiple roles of the cultural support workers. Their duties, which are made possible by and which are grounded in the development of successful relationships, construct affirmative opportunities for the *NYA WEH* students. As illustrated throughout this chapter, the cultural support workers are involved in complex levels of engagement. These connections to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities are successful due to the ability of the cultural support workers to navigate through these differing cultures. "Walking in two worlds" (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberly, 2010), the cultural support workers work from both Western and Indigenous epistemologies. This capability, to be bi-epistemic

and to take into account various worldviews, allows cultural support workers to do their work in a 'good way' as they navigate their duties daily.

It is remarkable to note that as new schools come on board with similar programs, another layer of complexity is added to the duties of these cultural support workers. The *NYA WEH* cultural support workers now work as mentors to the other cultural support workers at the other schools. Speaking about the guidance and support they provide to other cultural support workers who reach out to them from other schools, cultural support worker1 says,

We just hired another worker down at (another school), and after about a month s/he emails me and s/he was freaking out, like, 'oh my God these kids, you know, I'm starting to take it home with me and its affecting my home life'. I said, you know your bad days are going to be ten times what your good days are going to be, but the good days are really good. Like when you are at a graduation, or you get to help somebody work through something, you know. Those are the good days, and hopefully they will be able to get you through the forty bad days before you have a good one. (p. 4, 210-225)

The cultural support workers are doing all of this while also trying to stay healthy themselves. I wonder how they manage to handle the demands of their jobs, for, as the *NYA WHE Program* grows, so too, does the need and thus the cultural support workers' workload. The *NYA WEH Program* Elder in Residence observes,

And cultural support worker1 and cultural support worker2 will tell you the same thing. They could be running twenty-four hours because of the need. The need is there. And those kids don't all trust anybody, you know. So when they get to know you and trust you, then you are, I think, you are busy, busy, busy. (p. 6, 405-413)

The reality for the cultural support workers is that their roles can be quite draining. For this reason the *NYA WEH Program* is trying to create more cultural support worker positions to meet the increasing needs of the students in the program (p. 13, 895-910).

What I have worked to show in this chapter is that when we think about the *NYA WEH Program*, we need to remember all the critical duties of the cultural support workers. From mentoring, tutoring, counselling, advocacy between students, families, teachers, administration, providing food and transportation support to raising awareness of the program and recruitment, this is a demanding job that keeps the cultural support workers exceptionally occupied. As cultural support worker¹ describes,

So yeah, we do it pretty much everyday. Whether it's with a teacher, whether it's at home, whether it's with the vice-principal, or it's with the principal. Some days are busier than others, some mornings are busier than the afternoons, but on a whole I would say we are pretty busy. (p. 13, 849-854)

I have looked to understand the pivotal role of the *NYA WEH* cultural support workers. As I explored their multiple roles and relationships with youth, parents, family members, and teachers/ administrators, I looked at the huge influence the cultural support workers have on the success of the *NYA WEH Program*. My analysis shows that the cultural support workers are the centre of it all, working tirelessly to bring it all together. My analysis in this chapter was centered on the relationship-building that the cultural support workers are involved in as ultimately they are the links that hold the *NYA WEH Program* together. In the following chapter, I look to notions of culture and tradition as I unpack the third key element of the *NYA WEH Program*. First, however, I present a short vignette entitled *Reading the Big Drum*.

Reading the Big Drum

Early one May morning in 2009, the research team met with the principal of the school, who, as part of our tour, took us to the Native Arts classroom where the NYA WEH youth were having their first class of the day. As we walked down the second floor hallway, we could begin to smell the smudge⁴⁴ burning and feel the vibrations of the Drum. Entering the classroom, we stood with the Native Arts teacher as we listened to the youth powerfully sing the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.) song. Traditionally, the A.I.M. song has been sung by men from various tribes as they play together on the Big Drum: it is through this song that Nations give voice to the issues they experience. Tradition also holds that women stand behind the men, as a way of supporting them, while joining in the singing. At this school, however, in this classroom, something different was happening. Both the NYA WEH young women and men sat together playing the Big Drum.

The 'something different' that was happening in this classroom had to do with the ways in which youth were taking up Aboriginal traditions, specifically traditions around the Big Drum. As I stood in the classroom listening to the young women and men play together, I was reminded of an earlier conversation I had once had with a traditional Aboriginal man about women playing the Big Drum.

A year or so earlier, I had wondered if, given the contemporary social conditions in Aboriginal communities, the Big Drum could perhaps be understood as a means of bringing together Aboriginal men and women. As I had learned from an Aboriginal friend, an Aboriginal woman, long ago in a dream, was taught by the Great Spirit that the Big Drum

⁴⁴ Smudging is a sacred ceremony used to purify and unite. Commonly, the four sacred medicines (sage, sweet grass, cedar and tobacco) are burned. There are variations in style and medicine(s) used among Nations.

could be used to help unite warring Aboriginal Peoples. The woman shared with her people that the Big Drum was a way of bringing together men from various Nations: the men could come together to play and unite and this could help to stop the warring. As men began to unite around the Big Drum, peace was achieved amongst the Nations. My thought was that perhaps the Big Drum could be understood as a tool for interrupting conflict, and, as such, could possibly be used in the contemporary context to help with issues of domestic violence between Aboriginal women and men.

The traditional Aboriginal man with whom I was speaking told me that although it was okay for me to explore these ideas with him, that many Aboriginal community members might be extremely offended by this suggestion. As he explained, the Big Drum, and its instructions for use, came from the Great Spirit and were deeply rooted in Aboriginal spirituality. As such, I was told that the Big Drum should not be re-read in alternative contexts. To do so would be considered sacrilegious by many. I recall that, at the time, I believed that the rejection of a potential uniting tool was grounded in a commitment to maintain traditional Aboriginal customs. I was not sure (and am still not sure) if such a fixed understanding of tradition is best when looking to disrupt current social relationships. I felt that perhaps the Big Drum could be understood as a useful way of interrupting power relations between women and men in Aboriginal communities. As well, I wondered if perhaps women themselves could possibly benefit from uniting around the Big Drum.

I considered, though, whether these thoughts might have stemmed from my social location. As a middle-class, white, western woman in my early thirties who was new to Aboriginal contexts, I was coming to learn that the feminist principles I had been raised on and had been taught throughout my personal life and academic career may in fact hinder my

understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal epistemology. I asked questions, curious about a traditional Aboriginal man's perspective regarding the actions of Aboriginal women. A second lesson was taught. He told me that in the context of our friendship it was appropriate for me to ask questions, but that in Aboriginal culture one does not question the teachings of an Elder. I remember being curious and wishing to explore these ideas further but not knowing how, without the ability to question teachings. As we sat outside together, and began to throw a stick back and forth, he then spoke about how we learn things at an early age. For example, how did I know to catch and throw? To work in Aboriginal communities, he advised, I would need to consider new ways of catching and throwing, new ways of understanding equality and new ways of developing knowledge; challenges I could face working with new epistemologies.

In Western thought, asking questions is to demonstrate curiosity, a motivation to learn, a deep interest. This man shared with me that Aboriginal ways of learning, however, are less focused on direct questions. Community members learn through experience, example and reflective contemplation. By observing my stumbling words and my flushed face, I imagine he recognized that as he challenged my feminist beliefs and my ideas about knowledge production, I was becoming unsure how to proceed, not only in our current conversation, but with my work in general. How was I to unpack my ideologies in order to be open to new ways of doing and knowing? I do not know if this man realized how greatly this experience shook my foundation. To unlearn Western feminist principles challenged the roots of my worldview. I needed to go for a walk, to be alone, to think, to reflect, to open my mind to learning to unlearn, to fully absorb these lessons. For me, things were shaken up and I

needed the space to contemplate. These were some of the tensions I experienced when it came to ideas about knowledge, tradition and culture.

As an advocate of feminisms, I recognize that the feminisms I put forth are grounded in Western notions. I am curious how feminist understandings shift in an Aboriginal context. As well, I am interested to speak with and learn from Aboriginal women who identify themselves as tribal feminists. How do they reconcile Aboriginal epistemologies with Western epistemologies? Do they, too, experience tension when asked to choose? Or when told that one way of understanding is detrimental to another way of understanding? Is it possible to truly come to bi-epistemological understandings so as to take the best from each worldview? This experience taught me that I need to carefully work to unlearn Eurocentric feminist ways of seeing and thinking in order to create space for alternative ways of knowing and doing. The experience also encouraged me, however, to investigate what Aboriginal women were saying about traditions, cultures, and cultural resurgence. As I considered, perhaps some Aboriginal women and men might hold differing perspectives.

As I began my search, I found that there was much Aboriginal literature that, in the name of Self-determination and sovereignty, calls for a return to tradition. Literature that asks nuanced questions about gendered notions of Aboriginal cultures and traditions, however, was more challenging to locate. Slowly, though, I began to come across Aboriginal women, activists and scholars including Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq), Kim Anderson (Cree/Métis), Dawn Martin-Hill (Mohawk, Wolf Clan), Rosanna Deerchild (Cree), Zainab Amadahy (Cherokee), and Lita Fontaine (Dakota/Ojibway), who were concerned to explore these complexities. I also found literature by Aboriginal men who are asking similar questions. For example, Carl Fernández (Anishinaabe) is concerned with gender balance in

Aboriginal communities. The questions these scholars consider are centered on the theme of the “how’s” of cultural resurgence. For example, Anderson and Lawrence ask “what happens when we come home and we don’t like what we find?” (2003, p. 15). As they identify in their book entitled “Strong women stories: Native vision and community survival” (2003) these questions come on the heels of Emma La Rocque (1996) who asserts that “as women we must be circumspect in our recall of tradition. We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women” (p.14, as cited in Anderson & Lawrence, 2003, p. 15).

In the context of the NYA WEH Program, I am particularly interested in considerations regarding the ways in which traditions are interpreted and applied. I wonder what tensions the young folks in the NYA WEH Program might have experienced as they began to learn more about their traditions and cultures. More specifically, I wonder how such ideas might relate to women’s participation on the Big Drum and in other gendered traditions.

§

Chapter 5:
***Introducing the Third Key Element of the NYA WEH Program-
Culture and Tradition***

“And there is a silence about them that isn’t in any other part of the curriculum.”⁴⁵

Introduction: A quiet awe.

In this fifth chapter, I present my analysis of the third key element of the *NYA WEH Program*, culture and tradition⁴⁶. What stands out most to me as I read through the narratives, what comes out most clearly, is how important the cultural components of the *NYA WEH Program* are to Aboriginal youth. Traditions are important and, as a matter of cultural survival and resurgence, need to be learned and maintained. Learning of tradition is especially important for the younger generations. Without these lessons, younger Aboriginal People will not come to know their cultural heritage. Linking tradition to survival, we can see how loss of tradition can also lead to a loss of a People. Illuminating this point, Fernández (2003) writes, “Aboriginal people need their traditions to find meaning in life and guidance for the survival of our people (p. 250)”. I was curious to know how the teaching of traditions

⁴⁵ (teacher1, p. 7, 452-455).

⁴⁶ Conventional understandings tend to present the *culture of peoples* as song, dance, food, and clothing distinctive to particular ethnic groups. However, it is important to guard against limiting culture to singing, dancing and regalia. I argue that culture needs to be understood in a fuller, more anthropological way. While I include those components mentioned above in my understanding of culture, I also contend that it is imperative to conceptualize ‘culture’ and ‘cultural’ as processes producing a whole way of life. I, therefore, include the whole fabric of daily life including ceremony, livelihood, language, ways of living on the land, and how life is reproduced on a daily level, in my understanding of culture and cultural.

Notions of *tradition* can be subject to similar problems. Tradition can be conceived of as a set of historic practices which are fixed and unchanging. This historical hold on tradition is what gives traditional teachings such great authority. In the same way as culture, however, tradition can be understood as a looser more dynamic term. As such, tradition can be understood as always being re-made in contemporary contexts. I thus conceptualize tradition as a whole way of life that is historically dynamic and continuously changing over time. Understanding tradition in this way allows people to be faithful to bodies of traditional knowledge without constructing them as fixed ways of practice.

and culture were facilitated by the *NYA WEH Program*. Where did youth learn about ‘culture’? Who were their teachers? I explore these questions throughout this chapter.

Firstly, I focus our attention on the cultural teachings offered through this program and the ways in which these teachings impact youth identity. In this section I also discuss how the *NYA WEH Program* negotiates the sheer multiplicity of First Nations teachings arising from different Indigenous traditions. Secondly, I explore the relationships that youth have with the ‘Elders in Residence’ who are connected to the *NYA WEH Program* as I look at the ways that these relationships also impact youth identity. I then turn our attention to some of the tension surrounding traditional teachings as I unpack the young women’s narratives. In the fourth section of this chapter, I spend a great deal of time with the Big Drum, also known as the Pow-wow Drum. The Drum has become a significant aspect of this study because, surprisingly, it is the Big Drum of which the young women speak most passionately. I have a sense that the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* negotiates gendered notions of culture and tradition are having a profoundly positive impact on the youth. As such, I argue that the Drum can be understood as central and fundamental to the *NYA WEH Program*’s success. In the fifth section, though a discussion of music-making, I try to unpack the significance of the Drum, and the powerful impact it has on young women and men in the *NYA WEH Program*. Finally, in the sixth section of this chapter, I explore silences surrounding women and the Drum. Interestingly, only the older women in the *NYA WEH Program* spoke about their involvement with the Big Drum. Thus, in this section I attempt to think through the multiple gaps and silences in the *NYA WEH* narratives.

The impact of cultural teachings on youth identity.

From the moment our research team began to connect with the *NYA WEH* community, we were told that there is ‘something different’ going on at this school. I argue that the ‘something different’ at Sir John A. Macdonald has to do with the ways in which Aboriginal cultures and traditions are being brought into the Native Studies classrooms. When we asked both the young women and young men about the cultural pieces of the *NYA WEH Program*, the importance of learning about Aboriginal cultures came out loud and strong. Youth glowed as they spoke of the significance these new cultural learnings had on their lives. A few youth shared with us some of their past cultural experiences: dancing at Pow-wows, going north to reserves to visit family, sharing and learning traditions with family members. Many youth also shared, however, that before they participated in the *NYA WEH Program* they had not learned very much at all about their culture and that their parents too did not have a lot of exposure to cultural teachings. As young woman1 comments, “there is not really much that I experienced ‘till I came to Sir John A.” (p. 3, 172-184). Teacher1 explains the lack of cultural knowledge the youth had before participating in the *NYA WEH Program*,

By and large they are still urban Aboriginal youth, and they don’t have a large amount of connection with their Grandmothers or with their teachings. For a lot of them, this is the first time that they encounter that. There are some kids who have been into longhouse or into a sweat, but lots of kids who haven’t. (p. 7, 438-446)

Given the history of colonization and more recently residential schools, this cultural gap is not surprising. As a quotation from young woman1 illustrates, through the *NYA WEH Program* youth are beginning to gain more cultural experiences. She says,

The Native Arts class, yeah, I was in that for two years. It's good. Like, before I came here I didn't know anything about it. Like, I knew some stuff about my culture, and then I took some classes and I learned a lot more. Now I know how to sing some songs and drum. We made some drums and everything, so that was good. (p. 2, 126-136)

Sharings of this sort from the youth were common. The *NYA WEH Program* and the Native Studies classes work as bridges, connecting urban Aboriginal youth with Aboriginal cultures and traditions. Through the program, young Aboriginal people are slowly starting to learn about their own family culture as well as the cultures of other First Nations.

Importantly, youth are being taught about multiple Aboriginal cultures. This recognition of the diversity of Nations on Turtle Island challenges Western imaginings of Indigenous cultures as monocultural and homogenous. The reality is, however, that there are currently over 500 Nations on Turtle Island, each with their own traditions (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2100). The *NYA WEH Program* is committed to representing various teachings from various Nations. This approach is noticed by the youth who tell us, "Yeah, it's good... it's just not like one culture" (young women, p.9, 576-578). By offering a diversity of teachings, the cultural support workers and the *NYA WEH* teachers honour the multiplicity of Indigenous Nations in the area as they work hard to bring traditional teachers from various traditions into the school. As teacher1 describes,

We have a large Six Nations population here, but we also have a lot of Anishinabe kids. And trying to meld both of those in term of getting mentors in and cultural teachers, it has been fortunate that we are where we are, and we have had lots of people in the community who are willing to give of their time. (p. 5, 301-309)

Through community engagement the *NYA WEH Program* thus negotiates both the Euro-settler culture as well as the diversity of First Nations cultures. In so doing, the program

mitigates possible tensions and conflicts that might arise if they were to only represent one Nation's culture and tradition. By offering different teachings, multiple Nations are represented to the *NYA WEH* youth. Thus, the program combats the potential for cultural conflict by (1) bringing in as many traditions as they can, and (2) focusing on the core teachings that unite Nations. Describing this practice, cultural support worker1 explains,

We just have a general understanding in our program that is, we are trying to teach you core things and those core things come out of Haudenosaunee, Annishinabe. Any teachings are to have a healthy mind, body and spirit. Those are a lot of the core teachings, and I don't care what kind of teachings you are talking about, those teachings are coming out of those ones. It doesn't mater if we are sitting around the Big Drum or we have a water drum, or we have a Haudenosaunee come and talk about Longhouse, or anything. Those are some of the core values that are coming out, and respect being one of the biggest ones. And that is rampant through any Aboriginal culture, and it doesn't matter what it is. That is what we are trying to bring out. (p. 6, 382-403)

The cultural support worker/drum instructor also shares his insight into what makes sense for the *NYA WEH Program*. As he describes, he begins his teachings with the youth by asking for them to have respect and an open mind. Explaining that there are multiple ways and traditions, he locates himself as coming from Lakota tradition, identifying that the teachings he shares come out of this tradition. Sharing the way he tries to negotiate culture and tradition, he says,

Well, when I am sharing with the student one of the first things that I do is I ask them to try and have an open mind. And I share the teachings that I have learned over the past fifteen years. Those are my teachings, those are the ways that I have been taught. Lakota mostly, right. And everyone has different teachings, so I make them aware of that and have an open mind and respect, not just mine, but everybody else's culture as well. That is one of the first things that I share. (cultural support worker /drum instructor, p. 6, 367-380)

The cultural support workers also identify that there are, at times, tensions surrounding knowledge sharing. For example, cultural support worker1 tells us that some of the

Haudenosaunee youth are requesting more time and teaching around the water drum. As he acknowledges, the emphasis thus far in the *NYA WEH Program* has been on the Big Drum. Explaining this further, cultural support worker1 identifies two main reasons why there have been fewer teachings around the water drum: a lot of the youth like playing the Big Drum, and it also depends on who is teaching (p. 6, 382-412). And so, while it is not a perfect practice, and there is not yet a full balance of teachings, the *NYA WEH Program* strives to be inclusive, telling the youth that yes, they are working to bring in a water drum.

Representing a multitude of Nations is quite challenging, yet as this discussion highlights, doing so is mandatory for the program. The cultural support workers develop relationships with various Elders and traditional teachers in the community which then leads to a greater diversity of teachings coming into the classroom. As cultural support worker1 illuminates, who the traditional teacher is matters greatly, because they bring their own traditions and what they know to the learning environment. At this point, however, overall the youth are just happy to learn about any Aboriginal culture. I recall cultural support worker2 telling us that when it comes to culture, the youth want to learn anything they can get their hands on. As he shares, “they are always willing to learn. And it doesn’t matter what we put forth, they are always attentive and they want to learn” (p. 7, 456-459).

And so, there are lots of cultural learnings going on within the *NYA WEH Program*; through the Native Arts courses offered at the school, the history courses, as well as the other Native studies courses and the dancing, singing, drumming, Feasts, exchange programs, Eldership, community engagement and connections with the friendship centre and health centre, youth are coming to know their cultural heritage. Quickly, it became apparent to me that the Native Studies courses were having a hugely positive impact on the youth. The

young women told us that, through the program, they were now learning Aboriginal songs and dance, how to make drums and regalia, as well as learning about their cultural teachings. The young men told us that they, too, were learning more about their traditions and were enjoying the ways in which these learnings were helping to strengthen their sense of identity. Through the *NYA WEH Program* youth are engaging with community as they participate in such things as community Pow-wows and performances and travelling to different schools and different places to share their culture. One young woman is the head youth dancer at an upcoming community Pow-wow while another young woman is preparing to say the opening address the following week at a Board of Education prayer breakfast (young women, p. 7, 444-446). A young man is looking forward to participating in a sweat through the Friendship Centre: this will be his first time (young man6, p. 20, 1345-1346).

In these ways, we can see how program impact does not stop at the classroom doors. We asked the youth, directly, how important the cultural pieces were to them. Illustrating how the cultural components of the program link to their sense of identity, a group of young men share with the research team that they think that it is most important to have the cultural pieces in their education. They tell us that they like it, and that it feels good to be getting their culture back. Assessing the history classes, young man3 and young man4 tell us that the teachings are accurate and are being done in 'good ways' (p. 4, 259-290). Sharing a reflection of himself and the impact of the cultural teachings he is learning, young man6 tells us "and I learnt about all of the medicines, and stuff like that" (p. 19, 1300-1301). As he further explains, "then we had a guest speaker and she came in and she taught us a lot about tobacco plants" (p. 19, 1305-1308). Telling us that these teaching have been really important to him, this young man engages in the following dialogue with the research team,

- Research Team- So all of this has been really important to you?
- Young man6- Yeah.
- Research Team- Build your sense of self?
- Young man6 - Yeah, 'cause now I am actually starting to grow my hair long. I'm just starting, but I have a long way to go.
(p. 19, 1311-1321)

This last line, “'cause now I am actually starting to grow my hair long, I'm just starting, but I have a long way to go”, highlights the impact of the *NYA WEH Program* on the lives of Aboriginal youth at the school. In many Aboriginal communities hair is understood as power and as such is grown long. As this young man comes into his cultural identity, he embraces this traditional practice and begins to grow out his hair. What this young man is demonstrating though this quotation is that the cultural teachings at this school are having a life-altering impact on him. The teachings are changing the way he connects to himself, his culture, and the world at large.

Elders, traditional teachers and knowledge sharers who support the NYA WEH Program.

Besides the Native Studies teachers and the cultural support workers, through the *NYA WEH Program* youth also gain the opportunity to learn about culture and tradition from other Aboriginal community members who come to the school. I wondered who these community members were and who the Elders and traditional teachers were who supported the *NYA WEH Program*. How did the *NYA WEH Program* find these people and how did Aboriginal community members find out about the program? Laughing, the Native Arts teacher tells me “there is a certain amount of if you build it, they will come” (personal

communication, September 2010, p. 4). She further explains that the Métis Women's Association has been instrumental in helping to connect community members with the *NYA WEH Program*. Through a tremendous amount of fundraising, this association has supported the program by helping to pay for Elders and traditional teachers. Remuneration is an extremely important piece to the Eldership component of the program as often community members have jobs which they need to leave in order to come to the school. Commenting about the Métis Women's Association, the Native Arts teacher says,

They have adapted and adopted our program... They have made suggestions...they have found people who have great gifts, and they seem more than willing to be able to come in and support this program (personal communication, September 2010, p. 4).

Since its inception, the *NYA WEH Program* has had a number of different "Elders in Residence". One such Elder is an active community member who comes to the Native Arts classes and provides guidance and teachings to the youth. The Native Arts teacher shares a further example of this Elder's teachings saying, "she also does workshops on energy and positives and negatives and what happens to you when you eat incorrectly and don't treat your body well" (personal communication, September 2010, p. 4). When we asked the senior women what they thought about having Elders, ceremonial people and traditional people come into their classroom, they told us that they love it. The following quotations illustrate their connection to the Elder.

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Research Team - | Is it good to have Elders here? Traditional people? Ceremonial people? |
| Young woman3 - | I love it! |
| Young woman4 - | Yeah 'cause we get to hear their story from when they were little. |

- Young woman3 - Like [Elder] who comes in. She is just like, awesome, and everyone loves her. She is always telling stories. She does traditional things with us. She had these cards and they tell us things about ourselves and stuff like that. She does cool stuff, and like, she came back from being on vacation and she, like, brought us all something small back, and it was really cool. It's like having a Grandma around and stuff like that, and it's really comfortable and awesome.
- Research Team - I'm seeing a lot of nodding heads, that's your experience too for instance?
- Young woman4 - Uhuh
- Young woman5 - Yeah, she is a really nice lady (p. 5, 327-356).

As the Native Arts teacher describes, this particular Elder in Residence is a grandmotherly woman whose presence also helps everyone to behave better in the classroom (personal communication, September 2010, p. 4). Our research team had the opportunity to meet with another Elder who had recently become an 'Elder in Residence' with the *NYA WEH Program*. This Elder tells us how she sees her role at the school, commenting on the importance of allowing time when working to build relationships with the youth. She says,

I feel that just the idea of having an Elder there is comforting for them as well. You know, even if they don't come and say, they greet me, so I know that they feel that it is okay for me to be there. It is okay for them, so it is a start... (Elder, p. 5, 349-356)

No, I am not flooded, no, but they have the feeling that I am^{*} there and I can feel it when they come in. You know, they come in and oh, okay. I don't know how it is when I am not there, but I know that as soon as they walk in that book, there is an exchange of being...yes, there is a comfort level there, and if they need me, then I am there. (Elder, p. 6, 362-376)

The Elder in Residence also shares with us the advice that she gives to youth when the youth are ready to talk. She says, "I would talk to them and help them to be proud of who they were and not to let that be a hindrance" (p. 5, 298-305).

As we know from the research on residential schools, these are quite different messages than what Aboriginal youth used to hear when they went to school. This is not a message about assimilation but, rather, a message about being strong and proud of who you are, where you come from and who your people are. Also, the Elder makes clear that what is happening at this school is about going back to idea of family and nurturing. Through her mere presence in the *NYA WEH* room, she is communicating to youth the message that ‘I am here. I will care for you and be here for you. I won’t get in your way or impose on your space, but I am here. I am patient, and I am ready to build relationships with you’. These quotations illustrate the commitment this Elder has to building lasting positive relationships with the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*.

Having Elders as part of the *NYA WEH Program* is an important aspect of cultural resurgence. The Elder in Residence with whom we spoke, however, shares the systemic barriers that prevent many Elders from being able to participate in knowledge sharing. Identifying systemic challenges, she describes,

I don’t know of too many Elders that can, I guess you have to be healthy enough to get up in the morning, and be able to come in. And some of our Elders are very, very sickly, and some of them have, although they may be Aboriginal, they have no training or traditional teachings or ceremonies. That has all sort of gone by, so we are a few, but I will be here. (p. 5, 325-334)

This Elder expresses that the power the Elders can bring to the *NYA WEH Program* is restricted due to the on-going consequences of colonization. Many older community members are unable to perpetuate their culture because they just do not know it. Aboriginal people who have been through the times of powerful colonization were forced to assimilate into Eurocentric culture and are now in a position of knowledge deficit regarding cultural teachings. Now there is a crisis in reproducing Aboriginal cultures as fewer and fewer

Aboriginal people have cultural knowledge. As history shows, the longer a Nation is restricted from being exposed to its culture, the harder it is to maintain that culture. To compound this problem, Elders are aging, and even those who have somehow subverted the colonial system and maintained their cultural knowledges experience health concerns that prevent them from coming to the school. The scarcity of Eldership and cultural knowledge sharers will only continue to grow as Aboriginal culture is brought into more classrooms. As more schools respond to the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007), the fact that these important community members are finite in number will compound the problem of availability even further. The *NYA WEH Program* is, therefore, so very critical because Aboriginal youth need to learn their cultural knowledge so that they in turn can become future traditional knowledge sharers, interrupting the devastating cycle of assimilation that has taken place over the years.

Connecting with the Teachings: Exploring ambivalence in the young women's narratives.

It is clear to see that youth are benefiting from the positive relationships and the sense of family and community that is being developed through the *NYA WEH Program*. Youth are deeply appreciative of the program and the opportunity to learn more about their cultures. Curious as to how the youth were responding to the traditional teachings that were being shared with them, we asked youth how they engaged with these ancient teachings. Were youth keen to enact and embody traditional teachings or, given their lives in contemporary urban settings, did some of the ideas youth might already have conflict with some of the traditional teachings? How did youth sort through ideas about tradition, culture and contemporary realities? Was any of this a struggle for the youth?

The young women appeared very excited about the relationships they were developing with the Elders and traditional teachers who participated in the program. However, the young women also seemed somewhat disconnected from the teachings themselves. When I go back to the transcripts and the audio recordings of our Wildfire Gatherings and hear the young women share their feelings about the cultural teachings offered by Elders and traditional teachers, I am keenly aware of an ambivalence that seems to permeate our conversations. Although this does not come through as clearly via the written word, when listening to the audio recordings of our Wildfire Gatherings, it is quite apparent to me that a lot of what was being communicated was being done through pauses and tone. What I hear as I make sense of these narratives is that although the young women enjoy learning these old teachings, the young women do not necessarily incorporate these teachings into their daily lives. It appears as though they find it hard to reconcile some of the older teachings with their contemporary realities. And, although the young women believe that learning these teachings is really important, they do not necessarily intend to implement these teachings into their daily lives. When asked by the research team what it was like to hear those ancient teachings and if the teachings were important to them and if they learned a lot from the teachings, rather than long detailed answers identifying how these teachings impacted their lives, the responses provided could best be described as flat, unengaged and halfhearted. “Yeah” and “I guess” were common ways the young women framed their responses (p. 6, 375-389). We were specifically interested in the relationship between cultural teachings and youth identity, so we asked these young women if they thought the teachings made a difference in how they saw themselves. Young woman1 replies, “I guess, yeah, some of them can” (p. 12, 799). When we asked if the Elders and the cultural teachings

made a difference in their lives, young woman1 tells us, “Well, I can’t say that it’s really made a difference, but I think, I just think it’s really good to learn” (p. 12, 793-795).

Interestingly, the young women did not say that they wanted to or had to practice any traditional teachings. And so, while young woman1 comments, “Yeah, it’s nice to know about my background and the history behind everything. It’s interesting too, and it’s good to learn about” (p. 3, 191-194), she does not go on to discuss how or if these teaching impact her life, nor do the other young women we spoke with. She further comments,

Well, I think it is good. It makes you think like, wow, there are people that live like that, whatever you’re doing, you know? I think it is good to learn about it, even though we are living the way we are, and things were the way they were back then. It makes you think in a positive way, for me anyway. (p. 11, 736-749)

This young woman’s comment highlights the value of the teachings and also the tension between old and contemporary lifestyles. It also points to the ways in which the young women work through the traditional teachings being presented to them. Although this young woman appreciates the teachings, she acknowledges that present-day life is different for Aboriginal youth. I include the following dialogue to more fully illustrate the ambivalence expressed.

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| Research Team - | What’s it like when you hear those ancient teachings? I mean, are they relevant to you? Do they mean anything to you? Do they shape your life at all? |
| Young woman3 - | I don’t know. I listen to them, and like, I try to do what I can. But if I can’t do something, then I just can’t do it. But I try to learn as much as I can, as much as possible. |
| Young woman4 - | I’m the same. (p. 5, 313-325) |

As I consider the *NYA WEH* narratives in relation to each other, I am struck by the lack of discussion from the young men regarding traditional teachings. Do the young men not

experience tensions of their own? Was it not as much of a concern to the young men and therefore was not brought up? Do the young men not recognize the tensions that seem to produce ambivalence in the young women? There did not seem to be tensions for the young men, and I wonder, does this have to do with the gendered element of traditions? The silences around traditional teachings not only came from the young men though. We, as a research team, did not directly ask the young men's viewpoint about traditional teachings. I wonder why we did not. Was this simply an oversight on our part? Or were we also maintaining silences? In my reading of the literature from both Aboriginal women and men who question the regulating nature of gendered traditions, I have not yet read of a frustration with the ways traditions impact men's lives nor have I read of a frustration in the ways traditions regulate male bodies. Is this perhaps why we did not try to work through possible tensions surrounding traditions with the young men with whom we spoke? There is an odd thing going on in these narratives. An unmistakable ambivalence and subdued discussion from the young women about traditional teachings, and yet, when it comes to talking about the Big Drum, the women become markedly excited and engaged. I was curious why music might be more crucial to the young women than other traditional teachings from Elders. Why, I wondered, was music-making so incredibly important to the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*?

Oral traditions indicate that historically, daily life for Aboriginal Peoples was infused with art, dance and music (Amadahy, 2003, p. 144). Speaking to the importance of music, Amadahy (2003) writes,

Making music, drumming and dancing were ceremonies in and of themselves-spiritual acts that connected the 'artist' to her own spirit, her community, her ancestors, all her relations and certainly the Creator...Our music had a function...Music was a medium for passing on values, history and news. It was a

form of communicating thoughts and feelings. Music required people to develop social skills and engage in community activities. Through music, we collaborated, co-operated, laughed and healed. (p. 145)

She further contends that “music, drumming and voice are powerful medicinal tools” (p. 148). Brenda MacIntyre, singer and songwriter for the Toronto Aboriginal women’s group *Spirit Wind* agrees that music is medicine, and further adds that music can also work as “a tool for community development”. As she explains, music-making “involves learning, growing, sharing and transforming oneself as well as Our Relations” (as cited in Amadahy, 2003, p. 146). In the following section of this chapter, I explore these connections further as I look to the Big Drum as a way of understanding youths’ relationships with self, with other youth in the *NYA WEH Program*, and with ancient cultural teachings.

The call of the Drum: It just feels more powerful⁴⁷.

The Drum is the heartbeat of the *NYA WEH Program*. Both the young women and young men with whom we spoke agreed that the Drum is by far their most favorite part of the program. The Drum is what they speak of first, and what they speak of most passionately. They want to drum, they love to drum, and they are working to have more drumming in their school. Program Elder in Residence explains the significance of the Drum. She says,

Oh yes, the Drum calls. And you know, everybody and anybody, the first thing that you hear as an embryo is the heartbeat of your mother, and that never goes away. In fact, one time we were invited as a group, the women’s circle, to come and we have a medicine garden there and [person] invited us to come one Sunday, so we were there, we were drumming, and there was a man who came in with his wee baby and he was just wrapped up and it was so little, and so he was walking around and looking at the things and then we started the drum and when we started the drum that little head came right up and he turned and he looked toward the drum and his dad said, well look at him, and I said to him, it’s the heartbeat and he remembers that beat. He said,

⁴⁷ (young woman3. p. 16, 1068-1069).

I never thought of that, and he said, look at the little kid just sort of brightened up and bubbled around, and he was looking at the drum and he said, he was sound asleep, but I said, I know but it's the drum beat and all of us have that and it's the first, first thing that we ever hear is our Mother's heart and it is worthwhile to remember that. The drum brings memories and memories are way back in our minds that we recall and it is all part and parcel of being human but the drum is, I think the drum is the centerpiece of Aboriginal life. Aboriginal people come to life when they hear the drum and they want to sing and dance because dance is an expression to the Creator with the earth and the four directions and the four, you know the wind, the moon and the sun and the stars. Everything is interconnected with the drum. (p. 8, 540-584)

There is something really exciting happening at this school and it seems to be centered on the Big Drum. The Native Arts teacher shares that starting each day with the Drum has had outstanding results and has helped to teach the youth in the *NYA WEH Program* immense things. As she observes, the Drum teaches about "working together intuitively, about following instructions, about introducing the protocols of First Nations people, which are codes of conduct really that are more universally applicable than just around the Drum" (personal communication, September 2010, p.2). Drumming engages the *NYA WEH* students; they attend class regularly and on time and even get involved in performing outside of the class. Young man6 shares that through the Native Arts classes youth are learning about their culture: how to drum, rules for the drum, and how to respect the drum (p. 19, 1276- 1296). This same young man shares how significant and central the Drum is to his daily cultural practice, both at school and at home. He tells us that the Drum is very important to him, that he drums every day at school and that he has a drum at home that he uses everyday too (young man6, p. 18, 1241-1259). It is noticeable, therefore, that through the *NYA WEH Program* this young man is coming to learn and value his cultural heritage. His world now includes drumming to the point where he even puts his own funds toward purchasing drumming CDs. He is even considering drumming and dancing at Pow-wows, something he

says he never thought of actually doing before the *NYA WEH Program* (young man6, p. 18, 1250-1259).

When asked what they like best about the program, the young women also indicate that drumming is significant to their lives and that it is what they liked best about the *NYA WEH Program*. Young woman4 says, for example, “I like the drumming, I love it!” (p. 16, 1053). When I heard this, I immediately recognized that it was important to clarify if she was referring to the traditional hand drum or to the Big Drum. So far, no one had talked to us about women playing the Big Drum, but when our team had first come to the school and we were being given a tour, we saw and heard the young women and the young men playing together on the Drum. Young woman4 clarifies that she loves the Big Drum “because after you drum and you’re with everybody right and you are all doing the same thing and it’s just like...it makes you feel better about yourself” (p. 16, 1063-1072). Young woman3 also comments on her involvement with the Big Drum saying, “the Big Drum is the funnest...the Big Drum just feels more powerful” (p. 16, 1062-1069). The young women tell us that they, and other Aboriginal students, even skip their other classes in order to drum. They explain,

Young woman3 - Yeah, we skip and we just go there so we can drum

Young woman4 - Yeah, we’re not supposed to but we do because we just like drumming...

Young woman5 - Because it’s fun!

Young woman4 - Yeah, and it makes you feel good about yourself.
(p. 15, 974-987)

Obviously, drumming on the Big Drum is an extremely important activity for these young women. Even when they are supposed to be in other classes, they really want to be drumming in the Native Arts classroom. One of the strategies the youth developed was communicating

this desire to the non-*NYA WEH* teachers at the school. Young woman³ tells us that one of her teachers, recognizing and respecting their desire to drum, will at times allow students to leave his class. She told us she has never heard this teacher deny a request to go drum, but that students did not ask all the time (p. 17, 1131-1144).

When the research team asked what could be added to the *NYA WEH Program*, the women responded loud and clear saying that they want more drumming. As young woman³ suggests, “or even just like drumming class. That would be cool” (p. 14, 947-972). Young woman³ also shares that she is trying to work to have greater access to the Drum. As it is, the only time youth are able to drum is during the Native Arts class. She is in the process of trying to organize one extra period per week where youth can drum, so that they do not have to skip other classes in order to do so. She explains,

That is what I want to try and work on too, ‘cause the Muslim kids at our school are allowed once a week, they are allowed to miss class and go pray, like have Muslim prayer, and I think we should be allowed to miss one class a week and be able to go to [teacher’s] class and drum. (p. 15, 987-995)

Although tradition demands that only men play the Big Drum, the senior women articulate that this is slowly changing. At their Indian Friendship Centre, alternatives to this tradition are emerging. For example, although the young women and men can not drum together on the Big Drum, the young women are permitted to play the Big Drum on their own.

Explaining how this came to be, Young woman³ says,

We started an all female drum group. Well, the woman who worked there wanted it to be all males or all females, she didn’t want it to be co-ed. So more of us girls wanted to drum than more of the boys in the program, so she made it that it would be an all girls drum. And we got a little bit of teachings on why it was okay to have an all girls drum and that we are not allowed to let guys sit at our drum when it is our drum. (p. 16, 1089-1100)

This adaptation of traditional protocol around the Big Drum can be understood as an example of the ways that youth are being met half-way in the pull between tradition and contemporary desires and realities. The *NYA WEH Program* allows tradition to be bent even further than at the Indian Friendship Centre. Here the program says, ‘the women want to drum, we will let them drum, and we will let them drum with the men’. This is immensely significant and represents a paradigm shift in thinking. During the day at school, the young women and men in the *NYA WEH Program* play the Big Drum together! However, when the school hosts community Feasts, or when the Drum group travels to other schools, just the young men drum.

Through the hiring of a full-time cultural support worker/drum instructor who supports co-ed drumming, the school is ensuring to fund drumming for both the young women and the men. This hiring decision and on-the-ground practice reflects the *NYA WEH Program’s* recognition of the importance of drumming for all the youth who participate in the *NYA WEH Program*. As we can see from the quotations below, funding decisions have a tremendous impact on youths’ ability to participate in cultural activities. When drumming is not funded, the young women return to the more traditional elements of culture that are funded. The following conversation with these eager young women is significant because it demonstrates the impact that a lack of funding support has on cultural and traditional experiences for these youth.

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| Research Team - | So are you involved with any of the more traditional aspects of the program like the women’s hand drum group for instance? |
| Young woman5 - | I used to be a part of the women’s hand drum group. |
| Young woman3 - | I used to be part of it too, but we started a women’s Big Drum, but the program which was at the Indian Center, the program what was paying for it couldn’t afford to pay the person to |

come and teach us anymore, and ever since then we have kind of been slacking.

Young woman4 - Yeah.

Young woman3 - Like, we haven't really practiced since then, but like, the instructor said he would come back and help us when we do do it. So me and [another young woman] dance too for the program, for like performances. (p. 6, 372 -396)

There is more to share about the importance of drumming for the youth. The youth are engaged and want to come to school to drum. They are re-membering! They are becoming members again and re-connecting to their cultural heritage. They are all experiencing enculturation by uniting around the drum. As teacher1 and teacher2 suggest, the youth seem to be developing alliances around the Drum.

Teacher1 - [The students] develop allegiances and alliances that are based upon, I think, the drumming. You know, initially it is just bringing everybody around the Drum...I think that is what really started the heartbeat and really taught them to rely on each other. It is like a giant trust exercise, learning how to anticipate, and learning how to watch, and learning how to be respectful.

Teacher2 - Bringing them together towards a common cultural bond. (p. 7, 415-430)

We can see that, in part, through the playing of the Big Drum, both young woman and young men are building relationships with each other, with themselves, and with community members who support the program and who teach drumming to the youth. The youth start each day off with the Big Drum. Everyone comes to school, and to the Native Art classroom, in order to drum. As administrator1 identifies, the fact that youth come to a first period class demonstrates how crucial drumming is to them,

That Drum I see as very much completing the circle here. And then you have everyone coming. I mean, since when do you get high risk, inner-city youth coming out for a first of the day class with very strong attendance ratings? (p. 8, 509-516)

Drumming can also be understood as ‘completing the circle’ in the sense that through the talent show, the youth are also sharing drumming with the rest of school. Administrator1 states that there is something of honour going on here, and this is understood not only by the *NYA WEH* youth but also by the other youth at the school. Administrator1 speaks to an experience that encapsulates the respect that is being given back to the Aboriginal youth at this school.

Administrator1 - That experience I can’t put into words, but it is a very powerful experience, what happened with that Drum. And then, to see not only the combination of each individual student’s path and how they grew and healed through that, and continue healing, but when I came to the first talent show and the auditorium holds how many?

Administrator2 - 750

Administrator1 - 750, standing room only. At an inner-city high school where, you know, it’s hip-hop, it’s a hardcore talent show. To see our kids open that show, and to have their peers respect them and applaud them. I will never forget that. I gave up on the Kleenex I was crying so hard. That is something that, I don’t know how you put that into a report, what was given back to our kids. (p. 8, 529-552)

✱

Through the *NYA WEH Program*, there is something really neat happening around the Drum. Given the history of the drum, and the tradition of it being a male-only instrument, the fact that women and men are playing together on the Big Drum in public spaces such as the Native Arts classroom and in the auditorium, is remarkable. In the *NYA WEH Program* they seem to be very carefully navigating their way through traditions. Is this one of the ‘somethings’ that is working at this school?

As I pointed to in the beginning of this chapter⁴⁸, I understand tradition as always being re-made in contemporary contexts. Tradition is always being confronted, contested, taken up and played out in various ways (Restoule, personal communication, 2011). As with all traditions, Indigenous traditions are always in flux, constantly shifting and evolving. I suggest that the practice of co-ed drumming that occurs at Sir John A. Macdonald illuminates both youth agency and community dialogue. The *NYA WEH* students are active agents in their own construction of Indigeneity and of Indigenous traditions. Even as they are being taught, students interpret teachings and incorporate teachings into their lives, perhaps even in ways not expected or imagined by teachers, cultural support workers, Elders or community members. As such, it is imperative to acknowledge that although community members have ideas they share with youth, students are actively involved in the process of developing and re-constructing Indigeneity. I suggest that the *NYA WEH Program* is not about youth being ‘given traditions’ or having ‘traditions imposed’. In this program there are no completely ‘set ideas’ of what or how it means to be Indigenous. Rather, analysis of the music-making component of the *NYA WEH Program* enables a greater understanding of how the *NYA WEH* youth negotiate cultures and traditions in ways that make sense to their own lives.

It is also imperative, however, to understand youth agency in terms of the communal fabric of the *NYA WEH Program*. Youth practice of co-ed drumming is in constant dialogue with the cultural support workers, Elders, community members, as well as with each other. Thus, youth negotiating tradition is not simply a matter of individual taste. What is happening around the Drum is more than individual take-up, and thus it is not possible to reduce this practice to a matter of individual identity.

⁴⁸ Please see my discussion of tradition on p. 169.

Additionally important, the *NYA WEH Program* is an undertaking that incorporates a diversity of teachings. Thus, the *NYA WEH Program* is an exciting and engaging practice that carefully considers plurality of cultures, traditions, and notions of Indigeneity.

Traditional practices are thus negotiated in the context of this diversity. I conclude, therefore, that the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* interacts with traditions is one of the unique ‘somethings’ that is working to engage Aboriginal youth at the school.

The making of music: Tribal feminism and women on the Big Drum.

“It was said that long ago there was no drum among our peoples. Then the spirits gave a vision to a woman. She was gifted with the drum and told it was the heartbeat of Mother Earth. She returned to her people with the first drum. They were overjoyed with such a beautiful gift. As part of the vision the spirits told her that, although she would bring the drum to the people, it was the men who would carry the drumstick. It was the men who would play the heartbeat for the people. Because in that way they would remain connected to Mother Earth and so understand their relationship to women.”⁴⁹

In an attempt to overcome cultural loss, many call for traditional cultural resurgence. Aboriginal community members are seeking to reclaim themselves and their cultures. And yet, questions are being asked about how reclaiming impacts the lives of community members, especially Aboriginal women. Some Aboriginal women have begun to argue that given the impact reclaiming has on women’s lives communities need to be especially mindful of how they organize cultural resurgence. The Big Drum is one of the most sacred objects in Aboriginal culture. It is understood as an instrument of peace and unity, and there are strict rules and protocols surrounding the Drum (Deerchild, 2003, p. 103). For instance, the Drum is only to be used in ceremonial and other ‘good ways’. Traditional teachings about

⁴⁹ (as quoted in Deerchild, 2003, p. 97).

the Drum state that the Drum is only to be played by men. This teaching has left some Aboriginal women questioning, however, if this tradition is actually sexism. Deerchild (2003) explains,

In contemporary times, the teaching of how the First Nations received the drum has been translated into a rule – women cannot sit in the first row behind the big drum, nor are they allowed to play the drum. Instead, they sit or stand in the second row behind the men and sing. Many who practice the traditional ways will say it is because “that’s the way it’s always been done”. But it has left some Aboriginal women with a bad taste in their mouths and they have asked the question – Tradition or sexism? (p. 100)

Lita Fontaine, locating herself as a tribal feminist, has begun to think through questions of tradition in relation to drumming. According to Fontaine, tribal feminism seeks to reverse the shift in Aboriginal cultures from pre-contact matriarchy to colonial patriarchy⁵⁰. Although she agrees that this shift is slowly reversing, in her work, Fontaine considers teachings that have become gender rules. She argues that “through learned patriarchy gender roles shifted ceremonial protocol” (as cited in Deerchild, 2003, p. 102). For that reason, through a tribal feminist lens, Fontaine works to reclaim Aboriginal womanhood. As Deerchild (2003) writes of Fontaine’s work,

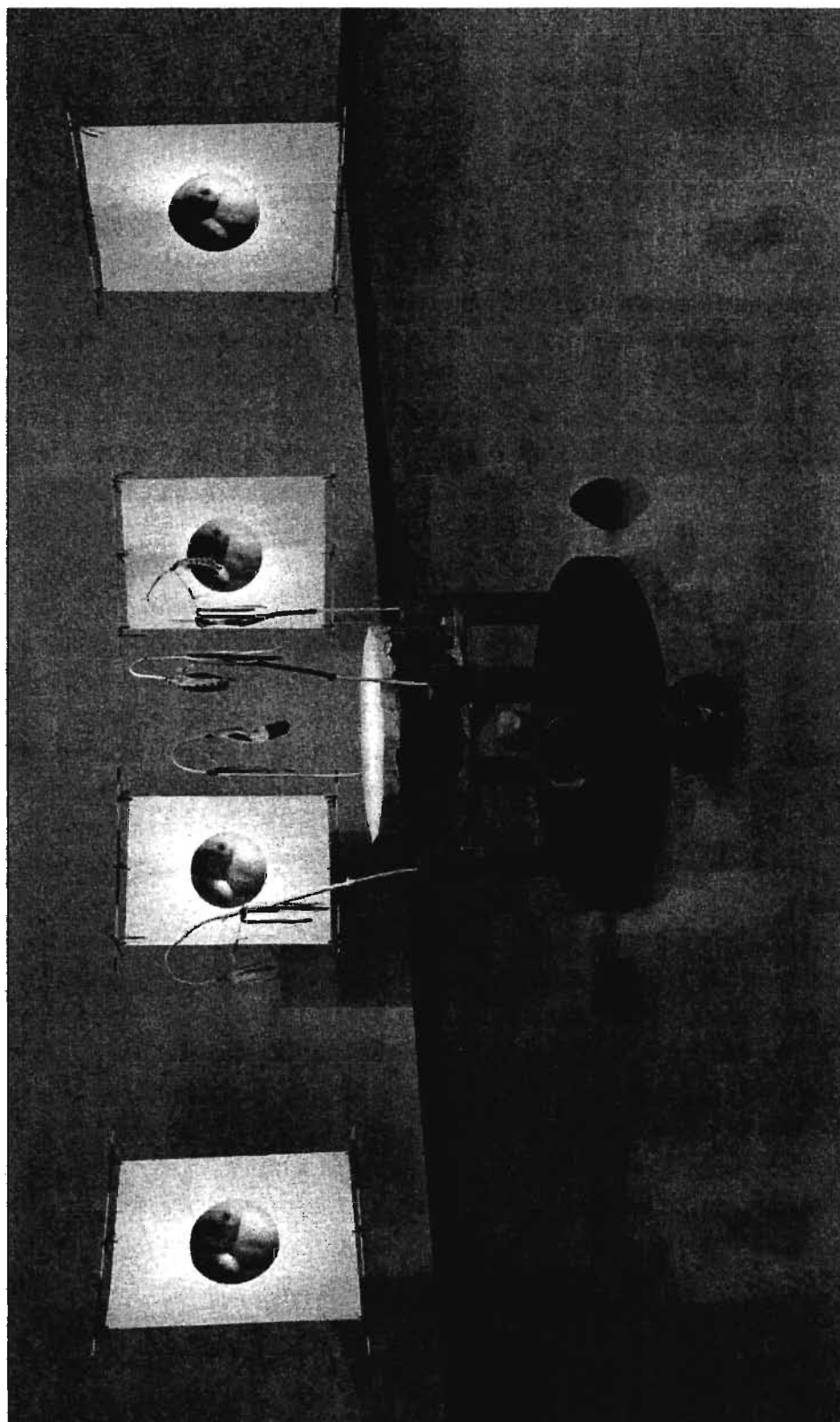
Her goal is to reevaluate, reframe and ultimately reclaim her Aboriginal identity and womanhood from colonialism, racism and sexism. But not just from the dominant white culture. Fontaine says she has begun to discover that these ‘isms’ also exist in Aboriginal societies and traditions. She has begun to confront what she sees as the patriarchy that has seeped into these long-held beliefs, ceremonies and gender roles. For her, this is tribal feminism, a new and whispered dialogue. (p. 100)

Through her artwork, Fontaine explores questions around teachings, pointing to subtle contradictions she sees as sexist. She identifies that her art represents her own struggle with

⁵⁰ Some Aboriginal scholars argue that this is an over-generalization and that several First Nations were not matriarchal. For the purposes of this project I do not deconstruct the perspective that many Aboriginal communities were understood to be matriarchal pre-contact with settler society.

traditional teachings that exclude women. As Fontaine clarifies, however, “I am not trying to change culture, I’m just trying to put it into a contemporary context” (as cited in Deerchild, 2003, p. 104). Fontaine’s famous installation entitled *A Woman’s Drum* (Figure 5) represents the questions women are asking about who has access to the Drum. Sitting in the middle of the room is a large Pow-wow Drum with a single heartbeat sounding from within it.

Figure 5. *A Woman's Drum* by Lita Fontaine (Deerchild, 2003, p. 99)



— ERNIE MAYER

A WOMAN'S DRUM INSTALLATION BY LITA FONTAINE

Contentiously, the Drum is surrounded by four pictures of women's breasts. As Deerchild (2003) describes,

A large drum, a heart beating from its centre, surrounded by pictures of women's breasts. No doubt it was controversial. No doubt it provoked, embarrassed, and even offended many in the Aboriginal community (p. 103).

In spite of the controversy surrounding the installation, Fontaine received support from many Aboriginal women. Deerchild (2003) explains,

Upon hearing about it, women come to see it, walk around it, listen to the sound of the heartbeat, look at the breasts surrounding it, and tell her they feel as though they found their place. It confirmed what Fontaine already knew – that challenging gender roles, rules, ceremonies and even our spiritual beliefs is not off limits (p. 104).

Aboriginal women today are confronting the tradition of not being allowed on the Drum; there are women's Big Drum groups across Turtle Island. Challenging cultural norms and resisting gender rules, these women advocate for change, insisting they have a right to participate in cultural activities. For many women, this fight for change is also driven by a desire to bring balance back to communities (Deerchild, 2003). There are numerous examples of women's Big Drum groups including Moonstone & K'oolgyet Na Hool Big Drum and Okistitawan Mista Hiya (Grizzly Bear) Women's Big Drum. Shannon Thunderbird (Elder, Giluts'aaw Tribe, Coast Tsimshian First Nation), member of Moonstone Woman's Big Drum group, shares her perspective on the Drum,

Since the beginning of civilization, Drums were one of the main universal signals for calling people together in good ways. They were and are humanity's common pulse. In other words, Drums do not know about race, racism, jealousy, hate, resentment, greed, language, genders, gender choice, human diversity. What they do know is the magic of inclusivity and the joyful sound of one heart beating. (Thunderbird, 2011)

Although this break with tradition is resisted by many traditionalists, women's Big Drum groups exist and are even appearing at Pow-wows. A growing participation in competitive drumming, however, has not yet grown to include space for women's Big Drum groups at traditional Pow-wows. As Deerchild (2003) writes, traditional Pow-wow's are still reserved for men's music-making on the Big Drum,

Today, women's drum groups are appearing in both the United States and Canada. It is a change that is slowly being accepted by the powwow circle, but only, if at all, on the competition powwow circuit. For the most part, women are still not allowed to play the big drum in traditional powwows. (p. 105)

Working to create spaces for alternatives to traditions surrounding the Big Drum, women are drumming together on the Drum and are also suggesting the possibility of not only having their own women's drum, but also having a mixed drum. As Amadahy (2003) observes,

Out west they have women who sit at the big drum and women's big drum groups. I notice the Iroquois women and men both play the water drum and sing together and there's a balance – high voices, low voices sounding together. It could be the same with the big drum. (p. 154)

Amadahy further reasons that men and woman playing together on the Drum would facilitate healing for both men and women. As she puts forward, both men and women could benefit from a co-ed Drum,

It would be really interesting to have men and women drumming together. It would be a good teaching for both the men and the women. The men would be able to pick up the vibrations that we send out as women and we would also be able to pick that up from them. It would be a really interesting balance – really healing for all of us. (p. 155)

Music and music-making are about healing. In the name of some traditions, however, there have been restrictions placed on women and their music-making. Although music is

understood as a cultural expression, Aboriginal women experience barriers when they try to participate in some musical activities. Consequently, some Aboriginal women and men call for gender balance in areas of music and culture. In a dialogue with Anderson, Lawrence explains the ways that urban traditionalism works to construct barriers for Aboriginal women who wish to make music,

In urban settings, for example, teaching circles often admonish the woman. What she can wear. How she has to sit. When she can drum. What instruments she can use to drum. Whether she can drum at all. If she can sing. Some people say that the woman should sing in the man's voice – that women should sing low. Other traditions say, "No, the women have to have the high voice". You can't be singing at your comfortable voice level; you have to be learning that high, high thing. To back up the big drum. There are all these prescriptions and dictations about every aspect of *the roles and responsibilities of women*. And partly, because I am not a man, I don't hear much about the responsibilities of men. Is that really being taught to men? I worry about this urban traditionalism, and when I hear this constant emphasis on the responsibilities of women, it bugs me. (as cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 270)

Such sentiments are echoed by other Aboriginal women who are interested in participating in cultural music-making activities. These restrictions are problematic because Aboriginal music is fundamental to Aboriginal communities, not only because it is a central component of cultural resurgence but also for the healing opportunities music presents. For example, when it comes to the Big Drum, many Aboriginal men speak of its healing capacities. As Amadahy (2003) writes, men "speak eloquently, poignantly and often on how 'hearing the drum' changed their lives" (p. 148). Following up these thoughts, she articulates the need for gender balance in music-making,

Clearly, Aboriginal music today, as in pre-colonial times, is crucial to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well being of women, children, men, families, communities and the Earth. However, there is concern about whether this is recognized in our communities and whether the concept of gender balance, one of our most treasured values, is respected in the musical arena. (p. 150)

Observing the positive impact of opening up various cultural activities in which ancestors perhaps did not partake, Amadahy (2003) suggests that participation is linked to healing from the impacts of colonization and genocidal practices. Importantly, she also contends that oral tradition supports changing traditions,

Today, women are welcomed into sweat lodges, vision quest ceremonies, and Iroquois singing Societies, even though our female ancestors did not participate in these activities. Though there are still some detractors, this opening of ceremonies and activities to women is widely recognized and accepted as necessary change to recovering the more 'traditional' ways of life in the interest of healing our communities and restoring balance after centuries of being brutalized by colonization, genocide and assimilation. This challenges the notion that 'tradition' is a set of practices that is frozen in time, static and unyielding. Even our oral histories speak of traditions changing over time. (p. 154)

Fernández (2003) contributes to this dialogue by recording women's perspectives on the subject of changing traditions. Interviewing one woman about the shift from the traditional male-only sweat lodges to mixed-gendered sweat lodges, he learned that she "found it affirming to attend mixed sweats because it gave her the opportunity to experience positive male energy, which was valuable for her healing" (p. 250). Also intent on resisting static, fixed conceptions of tradition, Martin-Hill (2003) observes that "in pre-contact times, traditions may not have been perfect" (p. 113). Amadahy (2003) echoes this viewpoint when she writes,

Our societies were not static. We learned, grew and evolved like any other people. Because tradition is alive, evolving and flexible, it enables us to survive and flourish as a people. Cultural and musical expression need to be part of this process. (p. 154)

Aboriginal scholars concerned with relations of power have begun to argue that some traditions are being used to subordinate women. They hold that in the name of 'tradition', Aboriginal women are being told what to think, what to wear, how to be, how to behave and

what to participate in. As such, emerging dialogues and debates are occurring within and amongst many Aboriginal Nations. As Anderson and Lawrence (2003) put forward, “How well do traditions serve women in general? How well do the traditions serve the women we are today?” (p. 16). Martin-Hill (2003) points to one of the ways in which some Native leaders are using ideas about ‘tradition’ - namely, they advocate that women not question their subordination. In her writing on this issue Martin-Hill (2003) identifies a voiceless woman she calls ‘She No Speaks’ in order to describe the emergence of norms about a “traditional Indigenous woman who is silent and obedient to male authority” (p. 108). Utilizing this character to illustrate the ways in which patriarchal ideas about ‘tradition’ are shifting the dynamics of power in Aboriginal communities, ‘She No Speaks’ has come to represent the good, silent, subservient woman who does not question male domination (p. 108). Embodying notions of the “traditional woman”, ‘She No Speaks’ encounters many men throughout her community who attempt to assert their dominance. These male authority figures put forward ‘tradition’ as a means to regulate women’s bodies. Through scolding and exclusion, gendered ideas regarding ‘appropriate behaviour’ are enforced. Martin-Hill (2003) comments on her experiences at gatherings,

It is impossible not to notice the frequent scolding of women by a few male Elders, pipe carriers and teachers for any one of a number of supposed violations of ‘tradition’ – for not wearing dresses, for being on their moon time or for not knowing their language. I have witnessed women being targeted as scapegoats when problems come up at ceremonies and have even seen the occasional removal of women from ceremonies. (p. 114)

As a result of these gendered notions of ‘tradition’ tensions have developed between competing ideas about traditional spirituality and gendered practices. As Fernández’s (2003) research illuminates, friction exists between the contemporary realities and the need for

cultural resurgence as part of a Self-determining agenda. Sharing his research findings, Fernández (2003) says, “from interviewing the women, it was clear that traditional spirituality is very important to them. They spoke of relying on specifically female traditions, such as Full Moon ceremonies and the berry fast, to give them balance in their lives” (p. 250). However, while spirituality and particular traditions are meaningful to the lives of some women, tension regarding other traditional practices has also created conflict. Fernández (2003) explains, “it was in the areas where male and female traditional practices overlap that conflicts occasionally arose” (p. 250). Most notable are the restrictions placed on women who participate in traditional ceremonies. For example, he writes,

In some ceremonies, women on their periods are told that they can’t dance around the big drum, enter sacred spaces, be around medicines or approach Elders. In others, not all of these restrictions apply. At some gatherings, women can’t enter sacred spaces without wearing a long skirt, while at others they can. (p. 250).

Exclusion from traditional ceremonies has significant negative consequences for women. As Fernández (2003) explains “In a context where very few ceremonies may be held and where a woman may be struggling with her healing, it was difficult to constantly miss traditional events because the days of the events coincide with her menstrual cycle” (p. 251).

Consequently, women are now faced with the complicated task of navigating the spaces between gender equity and healing. The theme of resistance to exclusion comes through as well in Amadahy’s (2003) research. One Toronto-based Aboriginal woman she interviewed shares,

When I first started learning about my heritage I didn’t have any idea, so I just did what I was told. I was given rigid teachings back then: you’re not allowed to be in the circle when you’re on your moon [during menstruation], you have to be this far apart from the circle, or you can’t touch sweetgrass but you can touch sage, or you have to put cedar in your shoes...there’s all these little rules and it’s like I don’t know whose rules they are. Everyone has their own way of doing it. For me what resonates is not

always the same. I might enter a circle and feel like leaving right away because I'm not sure how they do things. It's limiting. (p. 150)

Clearly, some women are refusing to accept ideas that encourage women to not think critically about which traditional practices should be recovered. As Lawrence states,

I resist the idea that it involves being ordered around. Don't think. Do this. Do that. That is not necessarily how we have to take it... (p.264). I think a lot of the trouble I have had with leaning about our culture has come from feeling that I'm not "allowed" to question traditions. For example, my reaction to the thought of sitting on a plane and having an Elder tug at my pants and tell me I should be wearing a skirt - that would anger me. (Anderson, 2000, p. 263)

Several Aboriginal women are unequivocally asserting that there is a need to question the traditions that are being revived in communities. They argue that this process of questioning is necessary in order to reclaim tradition in ways that are beneficial to the whole community. Arguing that there is a relationship between notions of a 'traditional woman' and colonization, Martin-Hill (2003), for example, questions if Aboriginal communities might be reinventing the 'traditional woman' based on notions that stem from Western influence. She considers the ways in which patriarchal colonization influences Indigenous traditions and cultures. As she queries, "how can we better understand the West's influence on our own Indigenous consciousness? How can we ensure that what we claim to be traditional is a tool for liberation and not a tool for oppression" (p. 109)?

Is the recovery of tradition being impacted by Western patriarchal ideas? How much of the interpretation of Indigenous tradition is influenced by sexism? How many Aboriginal traditions have been unknowingly swayed by western patriarchy? The line of argument is that if Aboriginal Peoples are socialized by Western thought, and then try to return to Aboriginal tradition, interpretations of tradition cannot help but be impacted by this

socialization - in this case by colonial patriarchy. Anderson and Lawrence (2003) write, "In many cases, we must wrestle with the patriarchal framework of colonization and ask what it has done to our traditions, including our social and political systems" (p. 15). Martin-Hill (2003) also concludes that traditions were certainly changed by processes of colonization (p. 113).

Fernández's (2003) research further identifies the ways that teachings about womanhood often focus on what women cannot do. The women he interviewed share that they often struggle with the reasons for these restrictions, becoming cynical about the validity of restrictions in contemporary communities (p. 251). These teachings, however, are not only about culture and womanhood. There are other sets of relationships at play here and those are the relationships between cultural teachings, womanhood and nation-building. Some argue that nation-building is being done in a patriarchal way. As scholars observe, this is a common occurrence in anti-colonial movements. Anderson and Lawrence engage in dialogue about Aboriginal nation-building sharing that urban Aboriginal teachings concerned with the roles and responsibilities of women, and with what women act and look like, are based on ideas of the 'traditional woman' and are part of a 'Mother of the Nation ideology' (Anderson, 2000, p. 270-271). Lawrence explains that these notions stem from ideas about women as mothers and caretakers of culture, so that women are valued more as symbols than as people. As she discusses,

The other concern I have is that in reclaiming the traditions, we are also rebuilding our nations, and the rebuilding the nations part can be interpreted in a patriarchal way. It is subtle. For example, we often talk about traditional things in ways that leave out women. This is one thing I like about some of the 'third world feminism', as they call it. Women who have been through colonial movements in other places have seen how anti-colonial movements appropriate notions of the woman representing the nation while at the same time placing stringent controls on the woman as part of gaining

control of the national destiny. And that is something that I wrestle with now when I think of reclaiming the Native traditions. (Anderson, 2000, p. 270)

Lawrence, thus, encourages us to think through the ways that womanhood, reclaiming traditions, nation building and patriarchy are linked. She shows how patriarchal forces are invested in developing a sense of Nationhood and how this is done through the appropriation of notions of traditional Native womanhood.

Amadahy (2003), too, writes about the impact of patriarchy and colonization on gender and gender roles. As she holds, “cultural activities in our communities illustrate how current attitudes and concepts of gender roles have been corrupted since colonization” (p. 148). Interestingly, some scholars argue that given the context of colonial institutions (residential schools, the Department of Indian Affairs etc.) many Aboriginal Elders and teachers in their communities may have internalized Western values. Martin-Hill (2003) identifies the impact of colonization on notions of tradition. As she explains,

The fragmentation of our cultures, beliefs and values as a result of colonialism has made our notions of tradition vulnerable to horizontal oppression – that is, those oppressed people who need to assume a sense of power and control do so by thwarting traditional beliefs. (p. 108)

Providing further example, Martin-Hill (2003) references Ward Churchill’s (1998) comments about how some Aboriginal People may in fact be taking up the work of oppression. As he explains,

Residential schools and missions were the agency used to intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically entrench Western values into our children. These children who have been hurt and shaped by colonial values are today’s Elders, advising us in spiritual matters and holding great authority in our communities. (as cited in Martin-Hill, 2003, p. 110)

Churchill (1998) further comments that “this type of transformation is one of the ways in which people become self-colonizing – we no longer need the priest or Indian Agent since we have learned to do the oppressing for them” (as cited in Martin-Hill, 2003, p. 110).

Following these lines of thought, some scholars argue that patriarchal ideas of ‘tradition’ are devaluing women’s voices and participation in community life.

There can, however, be serious consequences for women and men who fight to resist radical traditionalism. Those who do may risk the possibility of being constructed as outsiders who are not knowledgeable about Aboriginal traditions or culture. As Deerchild (2003) identifies, the suggestion that some Aboriginal traditions may be sexist or may extend from colonial thinking is contentious.

Just suggesting that a long-held tradition might be wrong is controversial. For many ‘traditionalists’ our ceremonies, gender roles and philosophies have remained unchanged over time. This was the accepted way of doing things. To suggest that colonialism, racism and sexism exist in our societies, much less our sacred spiritual practices, is almost taboo. Some say to just question is disrespectful and invites bad fortune into your life because it displeases the spirits. Those that do question tradition are seen as outsiders to our cultures or they are seen as people who are misguided about what the teachings mean. (p. 104)

I recall how my friend, who is Aboriginal, felt when he was accused by his friends of being an ‘apple - red on the outside, white on the inside’. As they continue their powerful dialogue, Lawrence explores this judgement as she relates her own experiences trying to think through alternatives to gendered traditions. She shares, “One thing I was thinking about was that if I oppose the teaching, am I just being ‘too white’” (Anderson, 2000, p. 265)? Regardless of the consequences, many scholars and activists are nevertheless still questioning the origin and purpose of gendered ideas of ‘tradition’. As Anderson (2000) reasons,

That is part of an Aboriginal pedagogy: double thinking, double listening. You don’t just listen to the teaching once and go home with your instructions and apply the

teaching by rote. Maybe the teachings will tell you something different the next time.
(p. 264)

Examinations of tradition are not just about the ways in which colonial values and beliefs might have impacted Aboriginal traditions. Some scholars also suggest that even if some Aboriginal traditions are untainted by colonialism, perhaps it is still useful to allow for modifications. As Lawrence pointedly suggests, “we have faced colonization here. We can’t simply go out and recover our traditions as if they haven’t been affected. And as Emma LaRocque says - were our traditions always automatically positive” (Anderson, 2000. p. 271)?

Finally, scholars are also asking: even if some patriarchal norms were part of ‘traditional’ thinking, does that mean these cannot be changed in order to achieve equity and inclusion? After all, no cultures or traditions are ‘static’ and unchanging – including Aboriginal cultures. In response to these concerns Amahady (2003) has put forward the concept of ‘gender balance’ which she hopes would better serve to bring greater balance to Aboriginal communities. In her call for gender balance she writes,

I submit that the notion of gender balance is an efficient production and powerful ideology that will serve our communities needs across Turtle Island (as it did for centuries prior to European contact). Striving for such balance in the arenas of cultural expression is completely consistent with other efforts in this regard. (p. 155)

According, for many Aboriginal women there is a clear need to create alternatives to some gendered traditions. This is a task that requires the efforts of both women and men. As Martin-Hall (2003) writes, women can also become active in their own subjugation. She explains, “We must also realize that Aboriginal women have been participants in our own oppression. We, as women, tend to position traditional male Elders, healers or spiritual

guides on a pedestal, which fuels an oppressive relationship” (p. 118). Similarly, Fernández (2003) suggests that there is a need for more female Elders, so that male Elders are not continuously directing women (p. 251).

As I consider ideas about cultural traditions, I wonder who has the power to determine which notions of tradition should remain static and unchanging. I wonder, too, how to reconcile past cultural traditions within an ever-changing multi-epistemic community. How does change occur? Through action and silence, too, perhaps? I suggest that strategic silences may perhaps actually create space for change to occur. The silences in the *NYA WEH* narratives are significant and I wonder what this means and if these silences have helped to contribute to change. In the following section, as I return to the *NYA WEH* narratives, I explore further the silences around the Drum.

Exploring silences around the Drum.

“The drum is what is going to heal the Earth right now, and what’s going to heal the people.”⁵¹

There is a powerful trend surrounding the *NYA WEH* narratives, and that trend is silence around the young women playing the Drum. Although the senior women we spoke with spoke loudly and passionately about their love for the Drum, no one else mentioned that the young women and men play the Drum together. In fact, had we not seen the practice when we visited the school, and had the older women in the *NYA WEH Program* not shared that they play the Drum, the Drum would not have become a focus of this thesis. I suggest that the silences contained within the *NYA WEH* narratives are quite significant. The junior

⁵¹ (Brenda MacIntyre (Ojibway/Odawa/Irish/Scottish) as quoted by Amadahy, 2003, p. 147).

women (grades 9 and 10) did not speak of a co-ed Drum, nor did any of the young men, the cultural support workers, the teachers, administrators or the Elder in Residence. And although the Drum is described as the heartbeat of the program, and completing the circle⁵², it was never identified by any group other than the senior women (grades 11 and 10) that at this school the Drum is co-ed. In contrast, at one point during our Wildfire Gathering with the administrators, when I mentioned how beautiful it was when we were at the school and saw the young women and men drumming together and heard them singing an honour song, an extended silence occurred and the conversation was shifted in another direction.

The young women's exclamations of joy for the Drum, paired with these multiple silences have made for a somewhat tricky situation. As a researcher invited into the school, I feel I have the responsibility to honour the voices of the women in the *NYA WEH Program* as they share how important the Big Drum is to them. I also recognize, however, the need to respect silence. I also understand, however, co-ed access to the Drum to be an important piece in the engagement of Aboriginal youth at this school. And so, although I do bring this practice to light by highlighting the discrepancies between the narratives, I try to do so gently and with respect while still suggesting that these silences are relevant and worth exploring at a later date.

As mentioned, an interesting point is the marked contrast between the junior and senior women in regard to their practices around the Drum⁵³. Although the junior women share their involvement with the women's traditional hand-drum, they do not speak of the

⁵² (administrator1, p. 8, 510-511).

⁵³ As discussed in chapter 2 (*Referencing the transcripts*, p. 81), throughout this thesis I have merged the two Wildfire Gatherings held with the female students in the *NYA WEH Program*. Our first Wildfire Gathering was with the younger women (grades 9 and 10). The second Wildfire Gathering was with the senior women (grades 11 and 12). It is only in reference to the Drum that I make the distinction between younger and senior women. I do so due to the significantly different patterns presented in the narratives.

Big Drum. And yet, it was the Big Drum which the senior women speak of most passionately. I wonder whether the junior women were also drumming on the Big Drum and simply did not wish to tell us. Did the research team perhaps frame questions about drumming in ways that made these junior women feel uncomfortable sharing this controversial piece with us? Or do these junior women perhaps not drum? Do they even wish to? Or do they find it odd, strange, or disrespectful that the senior girls do play the Big Drum? I wonder, do some of the senior women in the *NYA WEH Program* not drum? I note that, overall, the junior women were more shy and reserved during our Wildfire Gatherings and I wonder if this impacted their conversation with us about drumming.

It appears as though as the women in the *NYA WEH Program* age, they shift from playing the traditional woman's hand drum to the Big Drum. I wonder if this shift in instrument selection mirrors a shift in confidence too. Although this is not a focus of my current research project, future research exploring the connections between these two areas might be quite interesting and might yield findings that demonstrate a positive relationship between a strengthened sense of self-identity and a willingness of young women to take up practices that are traditionally gendered male. Based on the narratives, my research leads me to think that with increased exposure to the *NYA WEH Program* comes an increased confidence to participate in particular drumming traditions, even though those practices are not in keeping with traditional ways.

It is also quite relevant to note the silences from the young men in the *NYA WEH Program*. I wonder how the young men felt about women playing with them on the Big Drum. As I search through the transcripts, it strikes me that not once did the young men mention that the young women at the school play on the Big Drum. Young man6, however,

did indirectly point to this practice when he shared that there are different teachings about women and the Drum. As he indicates, back home women cannot drum,

Well, the funny thing is, when I go home, I go to all kinds of teachings now. And they are a bit different from the way the Mohawks and you guys do it down here, right. Like we have different rules about our Drum when I go home. Like, girls could sit but they can't drum, and if they do sit, then they have to sit with their legs pointed out. (p. 25, 1682-1691)

When asked how he deals with these conflicting understandings of traditions young man⁶ continues,

Well, I just kind of mingle them all in together. And when I have to drum up there, I will drum, but it is different songs, way different songs and stuff like that. But when I come here, I still remember how to drum here too, right. (p. 25, 1704-1709)

These two quotations illuminate the ways in which this young man is learning about various approaches to drumming. What is interesting to note is that he has also been taught by the *NYA WEH* cultural support worker/drum instructor that neither way is wrong; they are different, but equally acceptable. Another point that is illustrated through his sharing is that people are learning to become multi-cultural drummers, as they recognize the variety of traditions amongst Aboriginal Peoples.

I propose that some sort of process must have been worked through to get the *NYA WEH Program* to this place. While I surmise that this shift in protocol was, to a large degree, driven by the senior women, I also sense that it has come from the cultural support workers and from the drum instructor himself. Were these men perhaps the drive behind this transition? Would it even be possible for the *NYA WEH Program* to allow the young women and the young men to drum together if the cultural support workers were not in favour of it being so? Although in this research I am unable to firmly conclude that the cultural support

workers are pivotal to women's access to the Big Drum, I put forward that indeed they must be central to this shift in practice. As established in the previous chapter, the cultural support workers are the center of the *NYA WEH Program* and it seems apparent to me, then, that they must be supportive of the women drumming or they would not be teaching them to do so.

Conclusion.

To recap, the junior women were keen to participate on the hand drum and the program does create space for more traditional drumming practices such as women's hand drumming. However, even though the youth told us they love to drum, there are abandoned hand drums at the school. As the Native Arts teacher tells me, "but we also found that students orphaned drums" (personal communication, September 2010, p. 3). The senior women share ambivalence about cultural teachings and the literature describes how some Aboriginal women are resisting some gendered notions about culture and tradition. The senior women have given up hand drumming to concentrate on the Big Drum. And clearly, the senior women feel good about their drumming. As they told us, they feel powerful drumming and it makes them feel better about themselves⁵⁴. The women have a desire to work on the Big Drum, and are clearly going this way: that is where they put their time. They are even advocating for more drumming! In addition, the women are not being rejected by the men – in fact, the young women and young men all drum together. They have united around the Drum and this is why it is so important for the youth to drum together in their classroom. The youth are feeling stronger and are feeling good and are developing a sense of community and family around the Drum.

⁵⁴ (young women, p. 16, 1063).

What does this say about music and youth culture? Is music-making being re-imagined by youth themselves in ways that serve their interests? Is this about agency? Is abandoning hand drums perhaps a powerful act of resistance? Earlier in the program the senior women were hand drumming, but over time they shifted to the Big Drum. These women are telling us something important, both verbally and through their actions. This is very profound. Is it that the youth in the *NYA WEH Program* are not male drummers, nor female drummers, but Aboriginal drummers? They are classmates who learn about their cultures together, classmates who learn about their traditions together, and classmates who share activities together. They are classmates who drum together.

The youth are permitted to do what they want to do, in a ‘good way’. They are told ‘yes, you can drum, and you can drum together’. As the *NYA WEH Program* builds family, centered on inclusion, they create a family drum following the Lakota tradition. And although the *NYA WEH Program* has not yet shifted to a complete transition (at school Feasts and talent shows and at visits outside of the school, only the young men play the Drum), I suggest that over time, co-ed drumming will likely seep out of the classroom and into the larger community. My thought is that as youth become more confident and more resistant to traditions that might not work for them, their mixed-drumming practice will be made more visible as young women and young men in the *NYA WEH Program* drum together publicly.

In this chapter, I have argued that the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* navigates notions of culture and tradition are significant to the engagement of Aboriginal youth. Before moving into the final sixth chapter, however, I have chosen to first present an interlude segment. Given the sensitive nature of the discussion of women and the Drum, I decided it was important, as part of my relations of accountability, to check in with the folks

at the *NYA WEH Program*. I wanted to make sure that my representations were accurate and that the *NYA WEH* community was supportive of my taking up this piece in my thesis. What follows, therefore, is an interlude segment between the fifth and sixth chapter which I have entitled *Continuing Relations of Accountability*.

Continuing Relations of Accountability.

Upon completion of the draft of my thesis, I believed that it was important for me to touch base and informally check-in with the *NYA WEH* community. In keeping with Indigenous research practices and as part of gathering on-going consent, I wanted to share my findings, to say, this is what the youth were talking about, and what I have been writing about, and how do you feel about this? This interlude segment is thus dedicated to relations of accountability. Touching base was an opportunity for me to continue to learn from two *NYA WEH* community members: the Native Studies teacher and the cultural support worker who was also the program's drum instructor. Similar to how our research team was accountable for our preliminary research findings document⁵⁵, I, too, wished to be accountable for my thesis. Piquemal's (2000) fourth principle guiding research with Aboriginal Peoples is that researchers should provide data to community prior to final report. As she writes, doing research in a 'good way' means that researchers must,

Be able to provide the participants with the data prior to completion of the final report. The participants must be given all the information and data that might be useful or beneficial to them. Consent for research means that the researcher has a responsibility to the participants not only through the research process, but also after the research has been completed. It is important that the participants give their consent to the way in which the research results are being used and disseminated. (p. 51)

Sharing my findings before my thesis was finalized was an important component of accountability. Recognizing that the fifth chapter engaged with the sensitive subject of Aboriginal women and the Drum, I knew that it was especially important to check in about this chapter.

⁵⁵ A discussion of our research team's relations of accountability is provided in chapter 2 (*Community Accountability*, p. 85).

I met first with the Native Arts teacher. Meeting in the *NYA WEH* room, I began by verbally sharing my overall findings regarding Native Studies curriculum (chapter 3) and relationships (chapter 4). I then shared my overall findings regarding culture and tradition (chapter 5). As I shared my findings, and the thoughts I was left with as I was wrapping up the fifth chapter, we entered into a conversation specifically about the young women playing the Drum. I asked if the young women playing the Drum was a tension that had to be carefully navigated, and if so, how the *NYA WEH Program* did that. The Native Arts teacher replied that although the women do sit at the Drum and play at the school, they do not play the Drum outside of the school. She explains,

Well, within the *outside* world, like if we go out and do a presentation, we don't have the women sit at the Pow-wow Drum. There are enough different Nations in this area who would object to that, still. Within the confines of this school, absolutely, everyone starts out with the large Drum. (personal communication, September 2010, p. 3)

I was told that although women are traditionally hand drummers, and that within some Nations women do not sit around nor play a Pow-wow Drum, this particular practice around the Drum is changing (personal communication, September 2010, p. 3). The Native Arts teacher suggested I touch base with the cultural support worker who is also the drum instructor as he would have further input.

I meet with the cultural support worker/drum instructor and we agreed that I would forward to him an electronic copy of my fifth chapter, culture and tradition, and that we would meet the following week to chat. I am so grateful I had the opportunity to receive the cultural support worker/drum instructor's feedback on this chapter. Having read my text, he invited me to meet with him at the school. From there, we decided to take our visit over to Dundurn Castle, a beautiful outdoor space located just a few kilometers from Sir John A.

Macdonald. With juice and coffee in hand, we sat together outside enjoying the brisk spring day. I was intent to listen to all the cultural support worker/drum instructor had to tell me. I was ready to open my heart to what he was about to share, and to be respectful of his point of view. I was delighted, and to be honest quite relieved, when he began by sharing with me that he enjoyed the chapter a lot and that it felt good when he was reading it. Agreeing that he also understood the Drum to be about unity, the cultural support worker/drum instructor told me that he particularly liked some of the scholarly quotations in the section entitled *The making of music: Tribal feminism and women on the Big Drum*. He told me, for example, that he could relate to Fontaine when she wrote, “I’m not trying to change culture, I’m just trying to put it into a contemporary context” (as cited in Deerchild, 2003, p. 104). He also connected with Amadahy’s (2003) position that culture is “not static” (p. 154) and told me, “this is what I am doing, I am focusing on unity, bring the kids together around the Drum” (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011).

Similar to the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*, he, too, grew up with little knowledge of his cultural traditions. As he highlights, “I can relate to the youth. Not knowing my culture, I felt shy, ashamed and embarrassed not to know my history and traditions” (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011). He, then, explained that the teachings he brings to the youth emerge from Lakota teachings and Anishnabe teachings. As he explained, many years ago when he was first down in South Dakota, he met an Elder sitting at a Big Drum with a young woman. At the time, he was surprised and asked the Elder if he could ask a few questions. The teaching he received was that in the Lakota tradition families unite around the Drum. All family members, including

grandparents, children, women and men play together on the Drum. From this initial greeting the relationship between the Elder and the cultural support worker/drum instructor continued.

Now, years later, the cultural support worker/drum instructor passes those teachings along to the *NYA WEH* youth. The youth are taught protocols about the Drum, the history of the drum, how to respect the Drum and how to unite around the Drum. He teaches the youth about the four circles around the drum; the men on the drum, the women supporting the men, the dancers, and the ancestors for whom the people dance, sing and drum. He also teaches the youth about the A.I.M song, sharing that it is an anthem of the People from the 1970s, a song which gives voice to the issues that were being experienced, a song through which all Aboriginal communities can come together. He shares the whole history of the teachings around the Drum and the music played on the Drum. While he teaches the youth those traditional teachings, he, too, like the Elder whom he worked with in South Dakota, approaches the Drum as a family Drum. The *NYA WEH* young women and men thus come together to experience drumming and Aboriginal culture. As he explains, “it’s not just about reading about it. They get to feel it. And it makes them feel good” (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011). For him, that is what it is all about: feeling stronger and more connected to their Aboriginal identity. He says to me, “I would not take that away from them, so at school, they play together” (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011).

The drum instructor makes clear, however, that although the young women and men play together at the school, at community performances only the young men play. He explains to the young women that although they can drum at school, they are not to come up to him at a community event and ask to join his Drum, as it is important to respect the

different traditions in Aboriginal communities. Discussing this further, the cultural support worker/drum instructor explains to me that there are over 500 Nations on Turtle Island, all doing different things, and yet mostly women do not drum but stand in support behind the men. In trying to navigate through the multiple Nations' traditions, the drum instructor tells me he tries to keep the teachings simple, sharing two main teachings with the youth:

remember to honour and respect the sacred Drum and do what feels good, in a 'good way'.

Other teachings the drum instructor connects to the Drum include Medicine Wheel teachings which instruct how to keep healthy physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. As well, he offers Eagle Feather teachings as a way of sharing examples of good and bad choices. The third teaching concerns the Medicines, connecting tobacco with honesty, sage with sharing, cedar with strength and sweet grass with kindness. He explains that it is important for youth to try to always remember the teachings, and to not be shy and to learn their ways. As he communicates to me, "the idea is to plant seeds for youth to remember the teachings. Then, when they move forward and are faced with life situations, they have the teachings" (cultural support worker/drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011).

Reflecting on the chapter, he returned to Fontaine's words about bringing culture into a contemporary context (2003, p. 104). He tells me, "I just kept thinking about sitting with the boys and girls together and the drum and just jamming it all out"! He then shares with me what he wrote down the night before after having read the fifth chapter,

We are all equal individuals, men, women, children, races: but still respecting the teachings. And that is what I am implementing into the *NYA WEH Program*. A sense of feeling good about who we are - people. We all need some way of interconnecting with Mother Earth, a way of bringing back balance. (cultural support worker / drum instructor, personal communication, May 2011)

This quotation summarizes the ways in which the cultural support worker/drum instructor strives for cultural resurgence as he works alongside the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*.

What I think is so very important to recognize is that he is a young Aboriginal man who supports Aboriginal women having access to Drum. This is exciting because it demonstrates that Aboriginal women *and men* are both looking critically at traditions as they connect with contemporary realities.

Through dialogue with the *NYA WEH Program*'s cultural support worker/drum instructor, as well as dialogue with the Native Arts teacher, I attended to questions of how the *NYA WEH Program* came to have both women and men play together on the Big Drum. I offer my deep thanks to both individuals for their words. I appreciate their support and I am especially thankful to the cultural support worker/drum instructor for taking the time to read and think through the fifth chapter of this thesis. I am grateful for your teachings⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ This interlude segment *Continuing Relations of Accountability* was also reviewed by the cultural support worker/drum instructor.

Chapter 6:
The NYA WEH Program: A Model of Aboriginal Education for Self-determination?

“The path to self-determination is uphill and strewn with obstacles, but we must take it; the threat to our existence as indigenous people is so immediate that we cannot afford not to. The only way we can survive is to recover our strength, our wisdom, and our solidarity by honouring and revitalizing the core of our traditional teachings.”⁵⁷

Introduction: This was groundbreaking...this had never happened⁵⁸.

We have now arrived at the concluding chapter of the thesis. I first want to begin by reminding readers of the journey we have taken so far. The chapter, therefore, opens by providing a summation of the project and the argument of the thesis as well as a brief synopsis of chapters one through five. With this background firmly in place, I move into the remaining sections of the chapter. I bring the *NYA WEH* narratives into conversation with contemporary literature and strategies focused on Aboriginal education for Self-determination. The *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) mandates boards of education and schools across Ontario to better support the academic success of Aboriginal students. Since this directive was circulated, schools have begun to mobilize to meet its direction. And yet, schools are rather unsure exactly how best to move forward. Thus, the central questions I consider in this section are, *Is the NYA WEH Program an example of ‘best practices’ that should be considered by other schools and boards as they respond to the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework?* And, *Is the NYA WEH Program a model of*

⁵⁷ (Alfred, 1999, p. xii).

⁵⁸ (Elder in Residence, p. 7, 425-427).

Aboriginal education for Self-determination? I look at the continuum of Aboriginal education as I attempt to answer these two questions.

As I move toward concluding the thesis, in the third section I outline areas of future research and overview the infrastructure needed to support the *NYA WEH Program*. My purpose in so doing is to provide guidance, recommendations and suggestions to the Ontario public school system as it responds to the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Emerging from six years of experience, I suggest that the insights arising from the *NYA WEH Program* into Aboriginal education are quite useful and are worth considering by other schools and boards of education as they take action to meet the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2007) directives.

Summation of the project of the thesis.

The project of the thesis is to understand the 'problem' of Aboriginal student dis/engagement. Although I take my cue from the negative phenomenon of high levels of Aboriginal early school leaving, the focus of this thesis is Aboriginal student engagement. A positive solution-focused approach to this negative social problem will help to highlight successful educational practices within the Ontario public school system. This thesis project is enabled through the existence of the *NYA WEH Program*, and the larger collaborative research project in which I participated entitled '*Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*'. Through Wildfire Gatherings with twenty-one people, our research team learned from the educational narratives of members of the *NYA WEH* community. My own thinking developed in relation both to this research project and to the literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-

determination. I have strived to pay close attention to the narratives of the Aboriginal youth and their supporting community members in order to learn what is working at their school to engage Aboriginal students. To be clear, youth at this school are engaged, and my task was to determine what the something special was that was happening at this high school. Taking up the central question guiding my thesis, my task was to identify and articulate what is going on at this school and to bring those educational experiences into conversation with literature on Aboriginal education for Self-determination.

Summation of the argument of the thesis.

*“Without the program, I wouldn’t know a lot about my nation.
I wouldn’t know so much stuff that I know now, because of the program.
I think it really does help with identity, the program. A lot.”⁵⁹*

I argue that how we conceptualize “the problem of Aboriginal education” greatly influences our engagement with the phenomenon of Aboriginal early school leaving. As I reflect back on my original research question I find that I was initially concerned with how to best encourage Aboriginal youth to achieve higher grades, less absences, less suspensions, and ultimately, higher graduation rates. This approach to Aboriginal education reflects prevailing Western understandings of student disengagement. Upon reflection, I suggest that this approach to student disengagement, which reproduces Eurocentric thinking, stems to a large degree out of a common understanding of the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal education. Through this thesis project, I have come to learn that Indigenous understandings of student engagement emerge from a radically different perspective on Aboriginal education. Scholars concerned with Aboriginal education for Self-determination argue that in order to understand

⁵⁹ (young woman3, p. 10, 645-650).

the contemporary situation of early school leaving, we need to place this phenomenon within the larger context of the colonial education system. As these scholars maintain, we can not simply isolate the contemporary problem in the present, but rather, we must understand it in its historical context.

These scholars thus suggest that in order to properly support Aboriginal students, the current focus on western measurement systems (attendance levels, suspension levels, credit accumulation levels and graduation rates) must shift. Rather, awareness must be placed on Indigenous identity building. At Sir John A. Macdonald, in the *NYA WEH Program*, this is what is happening. The focus of this cultural support program is building stronger Indigenous People. I argue that this focus is the overall project of the *NYA WEH Program*. Through (1) Native Studies curriculum, (2) relationships, and (3) culture and tradition, the *NYA WEH Program* works to build stronger Indigenous youth.

Synopsis of chapters one through five.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I reviewed the literature on Aboriginal education and outlined the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal student dis/engagement. I then introduced the *NYA WEH Program*, as well as introduced the research project *Educational Narratives: Exploring Aboriginal Student Experience in Publicly Funded Secondary Schools*. The work in this chapter was to clearly establish the relationship between the production of knowledge and systems of education. I also worked in this chapter to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous knowledges, pointing to the fact that epistemology and knowledges are always in flux.

In the following chapter, I continued to explore relationships as I looked at the links between knowledge and research. Indigenous scholars argue that it is imperative to understand research as a political process. Having established the need for an Indigenous research project to be grounded in Indigenous research methodology, I concluded the second chapter by presenting the Indigenous research method we used in our research project, the Wildfire Research Method⁶⁰.

Next, in the third, fourth and fifth chapters of the thesis, I critically engaged with the *NYA WEH Program* narratives. One point that is really interesting is the way in which the program came together. Since its inception, the *NYA WEH Program* has been developed around the needs of students. This approach has helped to ensure that the program grew organically, and not out of funding requirements.

There was no template when we started this program, and I think that is the key. And we responded to the needs and the gaps that the students provided, and we worked in response to that rather than a funding response or a structural framework that was already in place, and we would have to meet those needs. (administrator1, p. 5, 297-305)

In the third chapter I reviewed the origins and history of the *NYA WEH Program*, described the material context of the *NYA WEH* Room, and outlined the process by which the program created a “home at school”. I also provided an analysis of Native Studies curriculum as I engaged in an analysis of curriculum development and the ways in which Indigenous pedagogy is brought into the classrooms. From teachers open to having their lesson plans reviewed by the cultural support workers, to inviting Elders and community members into the school, it is here that caring connects with learning. As teacher1 shares, both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy are important to consider. As this

⁶⁰ This research method was discussed in detail in chapter 2 (*Engaging with Indigenous methodologies*, p. 75).

teacher asserts, “there are ways in which you can make a curriculum very vital, and at the same time empower kids to get better at what they are doing” (p. 16, 1052-1066).

In chapter four, I looked to the cultural support workers as I took up the theme of relationship building. It is clear that the cultural support workers are at the centre of the success of the *NYA WEH Program*. Their dedication and commitment to the youth in their program and to their vision of Aboriginal education is remarkable. This comment from young woman³ highlights the importance of the cultural support workers. As she identifies, having Aboriginal role models positively impacts her outlook and career aspirations,

I think the best part of the program that has helped me is that I see cultural support workers, I see other people that went to post-secondary school and they studied their own people and then they could go and get a career, and help their people. And I think that has helped me a lot, because that is what I am going to do. (p. 13, 859-869)

The cultural support workers are faced with an ever-challenging, complex job. One of the main roles they fulfill is building family at school. At Sir John A. Macdonald relationships are being re-imagined. Historically, schools were designed to break the relationship between Indigenous youth, their families and cultures. This was the whole project of residential schools. Now, however, the opposite is happening in the *NYA WEH Program*. The ideology that fuelled the residential school system, and which tried to delegitimize Indigenous family forms, is being countered. The *NYA WEH Program* is trying to re-imagine school as a place that integrates aspects of Indigenous family/parenting. Re-constructing the family/school relationship is particularly crucial given this history of Aboriginal education in Canada. I understand the second main facet of the cultural support worker position to be negotiating resistance. Acting as bridges, we can see how the cultural support workers operate through multiple knowledge regimes. Their ability to be bi-epistemic is critical. “Walking in two

worlds” (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberly, 2010), the cultural support workers are able to challenge the teacher resistance that emerges from a doctrine of equality of cultures under liberal multiculturalism that does not take into account the distinct status of Indigenous Peoples, or the ongoing history of colonialism.

In the fifth chapter, I returned to the youth as I tried to think through notions of tradition and culture. Specifically, I brought our attention to the Big Drum and co-ed access. I signaled that the Drum was at centre of what is working in the *NYA WEH Program*. The importance of this chapter is in how it teaches us about strategies to challenge conventional ways of thinking about Aboriginal education. I was guided by a powerful quotation as I considered the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* navigated questions of gender and tradition. As Amadahy (2003) writes, it is important to continue questioning and to continue supporting women’s music-making.

We can ask questions about the values behind the teachings offered to us by our leadership. Let us hope that we are all honoured with opportunities to recognize, encourage and support the development of women’s music with as much vigour as we support the recovery of our languages, ceremonies and men’s music. (p. 155)

I believe that questioning and honouring are guiding principles of the *NYA WEH Program* and I suggest that the ways in which this program approaches cultural resurgence are fundamental to building stronger Indigenous people who are engaged with their education.

Considering the links between enculturation, identity-building, and visions of the future.

Through analysis of the narratives and the literature, I argue that the *NYA WEH Program*’s focus is radically different from prevailing approaches to early school leaving. Prevailing approaches, which are mainly concerned with graduation rates, are not about

supporting Indigeneity. Rather, these approaches are about acculturating members of minority ethnic groups into the prevailing western culture. As illustrated in chapter one, historically this has been the case with colonial education. Through processes including mission schools, boarding schools, residential schools, and the contemporary public school system, Indigenous youth are socialized and acculturated into dominant society. The ‘something different’ that is happening at this school is that Sir John A. Macdonald is breaking with this approach to education. The *NYA WEH Program* actually facilitates the opposite of residential schools. Rather than in the past, education at this school re-establishes connections with community and re-inserts Aboriginal knowledge, culture and traditions into the classroom.

At this secondary school, Aboriginal youth are becoming enculturated! Countering acculturation, enculturation creates space for members of minority groups to “learn about and identify with their traditional ethnic culture” (Little Soldier, 1985 as cited in Zimmerman et al., 1996, p. 296)⁶¹. The focus of the *NYA WEH Program* is identity-building and the position here is that it is most important to help youth to grow strong in themselves and their cultural heritage. And so the program does, through enculturation. From an Indigenous-centered perspective, the line of reasoning is that if you want to build stronger people and a stronger community, the focus must be on cultural identity-building. The point from this perspective is to support youth in feeling a stronger sense of their culture and traditions.

Focusing on positive conceptions of self-identity in relation to culture, enculturation is necessary for the wellbeing of Aboriginal Peoples. As Zimmerman (1996) argues,

⁶¹ Acculturation is defined by Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washienko, Walter & Dyer (1996) as “the process by which an ethnic minority individual is assimilated into the majority culture” (p. 295). Enculturation is defined by Zimmerman et al., (1996) as “the process by which individuals learn about and identify with their minority culture... the extent to which individuals identify with their ethnic culture, feel a sense of pride in their cultural heritage, and participate in traditional cultural activities” (p. 295).

“Enculturation is especially relevant for Native Americans because many efforts have been made to systematically and forcibly assimilate them into the white majority culture” (p. 297). As demonstrated through chapter one, this argument is true, too, in the Canadian context. Through participation in the *NYA WEH Program*, youth are reconnecting with traditions and their cultural heritage and are coming to a greater sense of who they are. Employing a holistic approach to student-centered learning, the *NYA WEH Program* helps participants to connect to their cultural heritage. The voice of one cultural support worker¹ summarizes the work of the *NYA WEH Program*. As he identifies,

We are trying to create the different generation. We are trying to create a different generation of people, and we are trying to break the cycle that a lot of Aboriginal People have fallen into, and we are doing that by creating stronger people. (p. 9, 557-563)

This, ultimately, is the project of the *NYA WEH Program: Building Stronger Indigenous People*. As youth become stronger, they begin to experience cultural connectivity which guides youth to a sense of communal responsibility. As the youth share, they are beginning to have visions of life projects and are considering ways in which they can give back to and support their communities. Putting forward their thoughts about post-secondary pathways, youth describe visions beyond secondary school and are talking about college, university and entering the workforce. The young women tell us, for example,

Young woman1 - I have wanted to go to college for the longest time when I finish high school...I want to become an early childhood educator because we don't have a lot of Native workers out there doing anything. So that kind of inspired me (young women, p. 7, 431-442).

Young woman2 - Going to college, I want to be a veterinarian (p. 7, 465-466)

Young woman3 - I really don't know, I'm still trying to figure that out. It would be nice to go to university, but....I am going to grow up, and I

am going to learn about my people, and I am going to go out there and help my people out (young woman, p. 1, 34-36 and p. 13, 869-872)

Young woman4 - I wanna go to Trent University and learn Mohawk. And then after that, I want to go to Queens University and then I am gonna be a teacher, and I am going to teach the Mohawk language on my reserve. (young women, p. 1, 34-43)

When we spoke with the young men they also shared their big dreams and post-secondary aspirations. One young man shares that he plans to go to First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory to learn how to become a bush pilot (young man3, p. 14, 941-951). Another young man tells us that he is thinking about going to college. As he insightfully observes, “all of our stuff is paid for. Our schooling, college, university, books, classes, so I plan on taking advantage of that and do something with myself (young man2, p. 14, 901-906). A few of the younger men we spoke with had yet to develop visions of the future. When we asked young man1 what he thinks about doing after high school he replies “get a job, don’t know where...wherever life takes me (p. 13, 889-897). Young man4 also identifies that he has not yet begun to think about next steps. This is not surprising, however. Both of these young men were the youngest in the group and were new to the school and, thus, new to *NYA WEH Program*. If the argument I maintain in my thesis is correct, both of these young men will begin to have visions of the future, and become more engaged with thoughts of post-secondary pathways, after extended participation in the *NYA WEH Program*. The impact of the program on post-secondary aspirations is explained by administrator1 who says,

I am willing to bet my last breath that there will be some kids that come out of this program that will in one way or another, whether it be through teaching or social work or volunteering, they will leave their imprint on this community. They already have, but as an adult, as a result of their experiences in this program, and as a result of

them reconnecting with our traditions and them as an Indigenous person, they are a whole person. That didn't come from a degree – no offense as hard work as it is – that came from a self-realization. (p. 26, 1748-1764)

This foreshadowing points to a cycle of disengagement that is being interrupted by the *NYA WEH Program*. Aboriginal youth are being supported in coming to know themselves and their cultures, and are being taught that they are capable of contributing to their communities.

Importantly, as youth begin to see visions of the future, they also begin to hold visions for their present. They are engaging with the present by engaging with high school, making suggestions and recommendations for how they would like to see the *NYA WEH Program* grow. We learned, for example, that the young men are initiating a petition and are considering fundraising options as they actively work to start a lacrosse team at the school. As young man⁶ tells us, “we are trying to get one though, we made a petition and got a bunch of guys to sign it, and now we just have to fundraise for our equipment” (p. 17, 1140-1143). Students are also making curriculum development suggestions, and are asking for more Native Studies courses (young women, p. 13, 885-889) including Aboriginal photography, native dance class and drumming (young women, p. 14, 920-950). A desire for language learning is also extremely important to the youth in the *NYA WEH Program*. As young woman³ expresses, “I think if I could add anything, I would add language” (p. 13, 858-859). Young woman⁴ and young woman⁵ also agree that they are interested in learning language (p. 14, 906-908). The young men, too, express an excitement to take language courses. As three of the young men inform us, they have already signed up to take Mohawk classes at the school in the coming year (p. 26, 1750-1764). McCarty, Borgoiakova, Gilmore,

Lomawaima, and Romero (2005) argue the relationship between language and education. As they write,

As local knowledges and ways of knowing are encoded in and expressed through local languages, language is central to any discussion of Indigenous epistemologies, education, and human rights. (p.2)

That Aboriginal youth are interested and motivated to learn Indigenous languages at school is of vital importance. Statistics show that only 16% of the 210 Indigenous languages still spoken in North America “are being naturally acquired by children in the context of family and community” (Krauss, 1998, as cited in McCarty et al., 2005, p. 2). Language learning facilitated through a Native Studies curriculum could help to counter the linguistic genocide that occurs due to “processes of cultural, economic, social, and political displacement that lead to language loss (Phillipson, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000)” (as cited in McCarty et al., 2005, p. 2). Consequently, youth recommendation for language classes has profound implications.

Youth also share that they love having Elders and traditional teachers come into the classroom, and that through cultural teachings and traditions their sense of self-identity is being strengthened. With an increase in self-esteem and cultural self-conception, comes an increase, too, in visions and dreams for the future. As youth begin to see a place for themselves and see a purpose, they become excited and start to imagine their futures. Moreover, when youth learn about their past and begin to see a pathway forward, they start to engage with the present! Thus, while the *NYA WEH Program*’s biggest importance is that it encourages cultural identity-building the program also helps Aboriginal youth to graduate from high school. Analysis of the narratives clearly illustrates the positive relationship between the *NYA WEH Program* and student academic engagement.

Analysis of the narratives clearly demonstrates that there is a positive relationship between cultural support services and academic impact. As I argue, however, although the *NYA WEH Program* is concerned with academic impact, its more important purpose is to build stronger Indigenous People. Through enculturation, youth in this program begin to have a stronger connection to their cultural heritage. This connection leads to positive self-concept and self-esteem, which in turns leads youth to having visions of their future. As evidenced through the *NYA WEH Program*, when youth envision their future they begin to engage with their present which leads to a positive impact on student academics.

***Our building a stronger person, creates a better person in school*⁶².**

The narratives demonstrate the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* supports youth cultural identity. Significantly, the narratives also provide an account of the ways in which the *NYA WEH Program* impacts youth engagement with academia. Starting with the intention to build stronger people, the program supports youth to engage with life as a high school student. As youth begin to attend classes more regularly there is higher engagement with course material and with school assignments. There is engagement with the school system as youth begin to do better, start to acquire more credits and put themselves on a path to high school graduation.

Young woman1, for example, tells us that when she first began high school, before she joined the *NYA WEH Program*, she was “flunking out”. She tells us that now, though, after joining the program and getting help, she is no longer flunking her classes (p. 5, 300-

⁶² (cultural support worker1, p. 8, 549-577).

306). Young man6 shares a similar experience of the impact of the *NYA WEH Program* on his academics. When asked if the program helped with studies, he replies,

Yeah, all the way. I am doing good. I dropped out for two years, then I came back because they have this program here. Ever since then, I have been getting good grades, and I am out of school this year. I already have my acceptance letter to Mohawk, Business Foundations. I want to be a bank manager. (p. 18, 1178-1210)

This student had previously disengaged from the school system, but was now re-connecting in order to join the *NYA WEH Program* and received culturally appropriate support. He is now engaged in his high school education and planning his post-secondary pathway! Such stories help to illuminate the positive impact the *NYA WEH Program* is having on youth academics. The young women also comment on the relationship between the *NYA WEH Program* and their academic successes.

- Young woman5 - Yeah, I think I am a better student than I was before (p. 8, 487-488)
- Young woman 4 - I think I have changed. Like, I am a better student. I never used to be the best student in grade 9 and 10 and 11, but I think I changed (p. 8, 487-497)
- Young woman2 - Yeah, it helps me with my learning and my school work (p. 1, 60-61)
- Young woman1- Well, with the *NYA WEH Program*, it makes it easier here for me. Because I struggled with my classes and math and everything and with the *NYA WEH* room, you can get one-on-one help, or whatever, if you need it. (p. 2, 114-119)

Concluding that when you build a stronger person, the stronger student comes along too, cultural support worker1 describes how this process works,

We are going to build this person up and then the education falls into place. And it does. You can see it, because it definitely, you can definitely see that. That is what I am always trying to tell people when I do presentations or when I am talking to somebody about our program and about the youth...By creating people that will

... speak up for themselves, people that will want to go on to post-secondary, and do those things. And we are seeing that... We are seeing that, and our building a stronger person creates a better person in school. (p. 8, 549-577)

Through one-on-one help, encouragement to go to class, love and caring, and culturally appropriate intervention, the cultural support workers strive daily to support Aboriginal students at Sir John A. Macdonald. And, as the narratives reveal, through their experiences with the *NYA WEH Program* youth become strong in themselves and in their self-concept. By meeting students' basic material needs such as food, transportation and clothing, through the Native Studies curriculum, healthy relationships, and learnings about Aboriginal cultures and traditions, the *NYA WEH Program* contributes to enculturation and increased self-esteem. What this research also shows is that there is a positive relationship between self-concept firmly rooted in culture, and student academic engagement and graduation! To summarize the crux of my argument, through decolonized subjectivity, youth grow strong in their sense of Aboriginal identity. As their sense of their Indigeneity grows, so too do their visions of the future, which ultimately leads to an engagement in present day life, thus interrupting the cycle of high school disengagement. This research therefore shows that there is a positive relationship between cultural support services and academic engagement. In the following section, I take this project one step further as I consider if the *NYA WEH Program* is a model that should be considered by schools across the province.

Bringing the NYA WEH Program into conversation with the literature.

My task in this section is to bring the *NYA WEH Program* narratives into conversation with literature on Aboriginal education for Self-determination. As outlined in

the introduction, the central question guiding my research has been *Is there a relationship between cultural support services and academic engagement?* Through the course of this thesis, I have determined that indeed there is a positive relationship between the cultural support services offered through the *NYA WEH Program* and Aboriginal student academic engagement. Clearly, the *NYA WEH Program* is a situated practice, but producing many insights relevant to others in similar situations. I consult the literature on Aboriginal education for Self-determination in order to take up my second research question, *Is the NYA WEH Program an example of 'best practices' that should be considered by other schools and boards as they respond to the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007)?* This question is considered within the context of the ultimate enquiry; *does the NYA WEH program support Aboriginal education for Self-determination?* As I take up these questions, I place the *NYA WEH Program* within the context of the literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination⁶³.

I promised in chapter 1 to return to the continuum of Aboriginal education in order to see where the *NYA WEH Program* fits along the scale from assimilation to self-determination. Analysis of the *NYA WEH* narratives shows that many of the standards Hampton (1995) articulates as necessary for 'Indian Education' are being attended to in the *NYA WEH Program*. For example, the program has constructed a spiritual space in school, a space where youth are taught about the past, have visions of the future and engage with their present. At this school, the Aboriginal community has developed a space where they are able to *Build Stronger Indigenous People*. This approach supports Aboriginal education for Self-determination. As Kirkness (1998) identifies,

⁶³ As described in Chapter 1, Aboriginal education literature is understood as ranging from assimilation to Self-determination.

Our new 'independence' education must begin with us, Our People, our communities. It must celebrate our cultures, our history, the true account of the way it was and the way it is. From there, we can build on how it should be and how it will be. (p. 11)

The *NYA WEH Program* is an example of an Indigenous learning environment and is an example of the ways in which the Aboriginal community in Hamilton is working toward education directed by Aboriginal Peoples. In this program, they promote Aboriginal knowledge production, curriculum, pedagogy, identity, spirituality, culture and tradition and Self-determination. The program draws from Indigenous epistemology to develop a Native Studies curriculum based on Aboriginal ways of life and worldview. Diversity is integrated into the curriculum as white imaginings of an Indigenous monoculture are challenged. Furthermore, the ways in which various cultures and traditions are taught to youth support Indigenous understandings that culture is not frozen in time.

The program has also worked to create spiritual spaces in the school, spaces which are central to Aboriginal identity. Space for healthy relationships has also been a key focus of the *NYA WEH Program*. Ultimately, the intent of the *NYA WEH Program* is to generate spaces where youth develop a strong sense of their Indigenous identity. There is community involvement, knowledge sharing, and a sense of family that is developed through connections with other youth in the program. Important relationships are formed too between Elders, youth and their families. This is very much about supportive and healthy relationships. Elders teach culture and tradition to youth who then go home and share Teachings with their families. Thus, the success of the *NYA WEH Program* is that its impact goes beyond the classroom, all the way back to Aboriginal communities. These Indigenous spaces are facilitated mainly by the cultural support workers. They are the ones who help to negotiate the epistemic conflicts that inevitably arise in a public school system. The primary activity of

the cultural support workers is to build relationships with the multiple people who are within, and who surround, the *NYA WEH Program*. They pull it all together, as they create an alternative educational environment where Aboriginal youth are able to gain a better understanding of themselves and the future possibilities available to them. As the narratives also show, youth are developing visions of service as they look for ways in which to give back to their communities.

The *NYA WEH Program* builds connections that are the opposite of residential schooling. In this program, they challenge the values promoted through residential schooling as they re-imagine Aboriginal Education in ways that directly challenge residential school legacy. The narratives confirm, too, that the *NYA WEH Program* facilitates positive attitudes towards Native cultures and good school-community relations. Of great consequence, the *NYA WEH Program* has found that program impacts are both cultural and academic! As cultural support worker¹ tells us, their vision of self-determining education involves a balance between culture and education (p. 9).

Furthermore, from hiring practices through to the day-to-day operations of the program, Aboriginal people are involved in decision-making. For example, because the HWDSB has no mechanism for paying non-teacher status Indians (administrator¹, p. 11, 717-719) Sir John A. Macdonald developed a partnership with Niwasa. This alliance helped to facilitate the school's hiring of Aboriginal cultural support workers. Implementing a creative solution to this institutional limitation, the school submits a purchase order to Niwasa for "culturally-appropriate counselling". Niwasa, in turn, then submits a bill to the HWDSB. HWDSB pays Niwasa, which then covers the salaries for the workers. Although the cultural support workers are paid by Niwasa, they basically work for the HWDSB and

answer to the principal of the school. The principal explains this process, “basically I am contracting Niwasa to provide Aboriginal counselling in my school” (administrators, p. 11, 721-732). As denoted by administrator1, such an arrangement allows questions to be asked during interviews about how far along people are in their own healing journey. These questions would not be allowed to be asked of board employees due to union restrictions. Administrator1 further explains that if union processes were to be followed, the program would not necessarily get an Aboriginal candidate who is suitable for the role of cultural support worker. In very crucial ways, the criteria can be different when the school uses the Niwasa interview process when hiring cultural support workers.

What the *NYA WEH Program* has done is construct an Indigenous process within a non-Indigenous environment. This story-line is very important to the project of Self-determination. In these ways we can see that the program is an Indigenous controlled space. In many ways, therefore, the *NYA WEH Program* can be understood as supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination. Analysis of the *NYA WEH Program* also shows that there are some tensions and limitations, however, because while the *NYA WEH Program* does support Self-determination, in other ways the program is still operating within an institutional context that is *de facto* assimilationist. For example, the Native Studies curriculum currently remains minimal and the study of Aboriginal languages non-existent. Although the youth informed us that they are excited for upcoming language classes, and had in fact already signed up to attend courses the following year, it turned out that the school was unable to provide an Aboriginal language course to the students. As the Native Studies teacher explained to me, the problem is that boards of education require teachers to have a teaching certificate, and, as this teacher assesses, it is a challenge to find a language speaker

who also has teacher accreditation. Thus, the ability to provide language instruction to youth is impeded by dominant institutional norms and practices. A further area of contention is standardized testing. As Hampton (1995) contends,

The standardized tests that are used to evaluate schools and students are the products of a white establishment that hires no Indian question writers, that uses test norms that are far from the reserve, and that assumes its own knowledge of both the relevant questions and the correct answers. (p. 38)

For this reason, many Aboriginal People argue that the cultural bias in tests is illustrative of assimilationist schooling. Tensions also exist with the HWDSB. As cultural support worker¹ discusses, when it comes to questions of Aboriginal student success, the Board is concerned with numbers. Accordingly, the focus from the Board is on credit accumulation, attendance, suspension levels and ultimately graduation rates. This focus on numbers, however, most often obscures the good work that the program is doing. As cultural support worker¹ explains,

The Board always wants to see numbers. They always want to see if student x is getting four credits a semester, is their attendance getting better or are they getting suspended too much? These are the three things that I have to watch and it's more than that, it's a lot more than that. (p. 3, 196-210)

As a way of negotiating these conflicting worldviews, cultural support worker¹ works with the students in the *NYA WEH Program* to show the HWDSB the positive impact the program is having on the lives of the students. As he shares,

We can show through our actions the positive stuff that we are doing and that kinda combats the numbers. The numbers are good too, there is a significant improvement in the numbers, but I don't know if it's as significant as the Board wants to see. But it is improving, it isn't getting worse. I guess you can't judge it on numbers, you can't judge it on those things, you have to judge it on what we are doing and the Board can see that. They can see that we are doing it without looking at the numbers. They can see the stronger people we are creating and I think that, for now, is good enough. (p. 5, 315-332)

Through community engagement and raising awareness of the positive impact of the *NYA WEH Program*, the cultural support workers engage in multiple sites of intervention. What is important about this discussion, however, is that the program is operating within the structural features of the Western education system. As much as the program argues their program is beneficial to Aboriginal students, if the HWDSB does not agree, funding could cease. Hampton (1995) argues that there are additional structural features of the Western education system that are hostile to Native cultures (p. 37). As he identifies,

Age-segregated classrooms; Natives as janitors and teachers aids; role authority rather than kin and personal authority; learning by telling and questioning instead of observation and example; clock time instead of personal, social, and natural time; rules exalted above people and feelings; monolingual teachers; alien standards; educated ignorance of cultural meanings and non-verbal messages; individual more than group tasks; convergent thinking; all these and more are structural features that undermine the Native child's culture. (1995, p. 37)

Furthermore, Hampton's (1995) seventh standard for a 'theory of Indigenous Education', *history*, also gives pause. As he determines, "Indian education has a sense of history and does not avoid the hard facts of the conquest of America" (p. 32). The problem is not the *NYA WEH Program* itself, nor the Native Studies curriculum, but rather, the ideological context in which the program is being mounted. As the narratives demonstrate, the *NYA WEH Program* is being mounted based on discourses of liberal multiculturalism. There are a big set of problems here from the perspective of Aboriginal Self-determination. The *NYA WEH Program* is grafted onto colonial institutions and relies on its dominant discourse for justification to non-Indigenous publics. Furthermore, within the larger context of the school and school system, Hampton's tenth standard for a 'theory of Indigenous Education', *conflict*, is also not taken up. As Hampton (1995) describes "Indian education recognizes the tension between itself and white education...[and that] education, as currently practiced, is

cultural genocide” (p. 34). Mounting a project like the *NYA WEH Program* in a larger space where colonial history is not acknowledged nor attended to prevents teachers from recognizing the contradictions Aboriginal students struggle with on a daily basis as well as from recognizing the conflict inherent in Western education systems.

My findings in this thesis suggest that the Ontario Ministry of Education, the HWDSB, and Sir John A. Macdonald operate from a framework of liberal multiculturalism and not Aboriginal Self-determination. This places the *NYA WEH Program* in a precarious position as it is a multicultural project being organized by and through white structures. Thus, what is happening in the program is complicated and delicate. I wonder, perhaps, if Hampton’s (1995) description of ‘Education by Indians’ is a useful way of conceptualizing where the *NYA WEH Program* lies along the continuum of Aboriginal education. As he describes,

Native people began to take an active role in the schooling of Native children as board members, teachers, administrators, and resource people. Small numbers of Native personnel have been introduced into non-Native structures and some Native content is provided through Native Studies, elders in the school, and other programs. (p. 9)

It appears, thus, that there is a case to be made that the *NYA WEH Program* is not quite a model of Self-determining education, nor it is necessarily what Hampton (1995) terms, ‘Indian Education Sui Generis’ (p. 10). As he puts forward,

Indian education sui generis is Indian education as ‘a thing of its own kind’ (National Advisory Council on Indian Education 1983), a self-determined Indian education using models of education structured by Indian cultures... the development of Native methods and Native structures for education as well as Native content and Native personnel. (p. 10)

I suggest, therefore, that it would be useful for the *NYA WEH Program* and other schools to consider how best to move toward Indian Education Sui Generis. How can a program housed within the public school system move beyond the limitations evident in the *NYA WEH Program*? What learnings from the *NYA WEH Program* help to move it beyond being an excellent model within a non-Aboriginal structure, to being a model of education structured by Indigenous cultures? To conclude my analysis, I reason that the *NYA WEH Program* both is, and is not, a model of Aboriginal education for Self-determination. In many significant ways the *NYA WEH Program* is schooling for Self-determination, and yet, it is housed in an environment which reproduces aspects of schooling for assimilation.

I suggest that boards of education throughout Ontario consider the experiences of the *NYA WEH Program* as they work to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in their schools. I further suggest that in order to unpack the multiple contradictions that arise from housing an Aboriginal education project within a western structure, Aboriginal communities must carefully consider how to fully operationalize a project geared toward Aboriginal education for Self-determination within the public school system.

Pulling it all together: The infrastructure supporting the NYA WEH Program.

My intent in this chapter was to demonstrate that particular standards for Aboriginal education must be considered as other schools contend with the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The *NYA WEH* experience can offer valuable insights into the ways in which Aboriginal education could be better attended to within the Ontario public school system. It is my guiding thought that the knowledge gained from this school may be relevant to other schools

and boards of education as they mobilize to respond to the needs of Aboriginal students, as mandated through the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The following summary of recommendations regarding necessary infrastructure to support a program such as the *NYA WEH Program* is drawn from the narratives.

- An Indigenous space grounded in Indigenous spiritualities and epistemologies
- More cultural support workers
- Aboriginal teachers in the school
- Trusting teacher-student relationships. Sympathetic teachers need to know and understand Aboriginal students
- Greater community involvement with Elders, traditional teachers and knowledge sharers
- Support of senior leadership to help combat teacher and non-Aboriginal youth resistance
- An Aboriginal liaison who works between the school board and trustee level and between the program level and the community - someone who understands the evolving priorities of Aboriginal Peoples
- Outreach into elementary and high schools so that Aboriginal students become aware of the *NYA WEH Program*
- More Native Studies classes including language classes, Native dance classes, and drumming classes
- Native Studies curriculum that is specialized all the way through high school for Aboriginal students
- A full-time administrator to co-ordinate the *NYA WEH Program*
- A board level Principal of Aboriginal education
- A *NYA WEH Program* in elementary schools
- A guaranteed yearly budget from the Ministry to support the *NYA WEH Program*
- Re-consideration of self-identification policies. Currently, parents are protecting their children by not identifying them. Aboriginal Peoples will not self-identify unless there is a reason to do so, such as the benefits of a *NYA WEH Program*

Areas of future research.

This research project, grounded in the *NYA WEH* narratives, has raised numerous intellectual and political problems that are worthy of further exploration but are beyond the scope of this project. For example, it would be interesting to expand this study to the other *NYA WEH Program* offered at Cathedral High School, either as a comparison between the two sites or as a richer study of the full *NYA WEH Programs* offered in Hamilton. Such research could possibly illuminate the tensions of developing an Aboriginal education program within varying school boards. Administrator1 comments on the value of such a study, sharing,

It is the same program, it is the same sponsor and there are the same opportunities, and there should be differences because there are cultural differences in the two different school boards, but it was a very different journey in the other school board...and yet it is articulated often times at a higher level to be the same program. (p. 14, 922-937)

Furthermore, research exploring connections between the *NYA WEH Program* and other Aboriginal education school programming might be relevant and bring the *NYA WEH Program* further into the evolving story/history of addressing the legacy of residential schooling. Such exploration of other school interventions, student supports, and Aboriginal education programming aimed at deepening cultural knowledge, could be very fruitful.

I highlight two major areas that come out of this particular study: the contradictions of Aboriginal education within a liberal multiculturalism framework, and the contested character of Aboriginal culture and tradition within Aboriginal communities. The fourth chapter points to the need for future research exploring tensions between Aboriginal Self-determination and liberal multiculturalism. The *NYA WEH* narratives open up a particularly

interesting set of questions as they point to tensions between discourses of equality and multiculturalism and broader Aboriginal rights. I suggest that the tension the *NYA WEH Program* experiences are indicative of a broader political struggle over Aboriginal Self-determination in the Canadian context. Consequently, a second set of research questions that emerge from this line of inquiry revolve around the relation between discourses of sovereignty, self-determination and treaty rights, on the one hand, and liberal discourses of equality on the other, in terms of competing individual and group entitlements. In part, the *NYA WEH Program* is responding to systemic poverty that is experienced by underprivileged Aboriginal communities across Ontario. They dedicate significant resources to this because of the particularly high levels of poverty facing Aboriginal Peoples in Hamilton. The resources are critical to the success of the students and the program. The tension that arises here, however, is in the absence of a discourse of Aboriginal treaty rights, the provision of these resources leaves the *NYA WEH Program* vulnerable to the notion that Indigenous Peoples receive 'special privileges' not accorded to other individuals or collectives, in violation to the principle of liberal equality. Non-Indigenous youth attending Sir John A. Macdonald also experience poverty, as gaps between the rich and the poor increase overall across Ontario and Canada more broadly. As Canadian society becomes more economically polarized, with higher rates of social exclusion, the stage will be set for mounting tensions among competing claims. Against the larger context of growing disenfranchisement, it is pressing to explore implications of Aboriginal education being understood in terms of Nation-to-Nation treaty agreements and the relationship between this and rights to education in a liberal and multicultural framework.

The thorny problem that emerges from the fifth chapter is the gendered question of tradition and the conundrum this creates for practices in Aboriginal education. The gendered difference that has appeared reveals a lacuna in the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 on Aboriginal education for Self-determination. For instance, this literature does not engage other literatures by Aboriginal scholars, specifically those on gender relations, which are highly relevant to debates about incorporating culture and tradition in Aboriginal pedagogies and education for Self-determination (see Anderson, 2000; Anderson & Lawrence, 2003; La Rocque, 1996, Maracle, 1996, Martin-Hill, 2003). Anderson (2000), for example, discusses issues of education in terms of young women and role models, as well in terms of resistance to traditional representations of Aboriginal women. Analysis bridging tradition and gendered concerns (as expressed by Tribal feminism, Native feminism, the Aboriginal women's movement) would add to debates about Aboriginal education as these literatures offer reformulations and substantive critiques to fixed notions of culture and tradition.

I am aware that the *NYA WEH* narratives raise a huge set of questions and debates surrounding reclaiming. Tensions exist due to differing notions of tradition. Some understandings of enculturation reinforce the idea of 'returning' to a static notion of culture that may very well have been deeply influenced by colonial gender norms or otherwise deemed undesirable to contemporary Indigenous communities. Emerging literature, however, presents culture as socially-constructed and always in flux. Such conceptualizations challenge essentialist notions while creating space for growth and change. Close attention to what is happening at this school allows us to recognize the plurality of Indigenous traditions, their internal diversity, and their historical dynamism. I do not suggest this is a simple matter. I do suggest, however, that this research open up many avenues for further scholarly inquiry

in thinking about educational strategies and policy and pedagogy. Such an approach may add to understandings of various ways in which Aboriginal Peoples are picking up and returning to traditions.

Conclusion.

Throughout this thesis I have consulted the body of literature supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination in order to make sense of the *NYA WEH* narratives and to understand how the *NYA WEH* learnings connect with Aboriginal youth engagement. I assert that situating these narratives in this body of literature can set up a conversation geared to supporting the needs of Aboriginal youth who participate in the public school system. Aboriginal scholars argue that it is necessary to understand the contemporary reality of early school leaving in the history of colonial education. Furthermore, these authors demonstrate that prevailing ways of thinking about this problem are not appropriate, nor effective. We must, rather, look to Aboriginal understandings of early school leaving and Aboriginal communities themselves in order to learn how best to support Aboriginal student engagement.

Having had the privilege to engage with the *NYA WEH Program* at Sir John A. Macdonald I see how the Aboriginal community in Hamilton is breaking with this colonial history. The *NYA WEH Program* is a form of direct action. It is about healing, learning, culture and tradition. It is about perseverance; it is about grass-roots leadership. At the end of the day, this program is about building up the identity of Aboriginal youth. There is a strong co-relation between these educational practices and engagement with academia. This study has also showed questions about the sustainability of the program as well as inherent

contradictions in the program. Success of initiatives like this relies on epistemic shifts both within individual schools as well as at the institutional level. The future is uncertain on this front, because while boards of education are being directed to do something differently to address the so-called ‘problem’ of Aboriginal youth dis/engagement, the question is, what are they being asked to do? And out of what epistemology do these new doings emerge?

This research has led me to new understandings of Aboriginal education. As opposed to western measurements for tracking “student success”, I now know that a project supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination cannot solely be measured by graduation rates. Rather, such a project provides new frameworks focused on identity building. This is the way to get at the root of the problem, as youth not graduating from high school is merely a symptom of a much larger set of problems that have arisen from and through the on-going consequences of colonization. What the *NYA WEH Program* teaches me is that as Aboriginal youth become stronger in their self-identity, they come to see a future, and a purpose, and a way out of the cycle many have found themselves in. Moreover, the *NYA WEH Program* works to unpack and reverse the legacy of residential schooling. Consequently, projects of decolonization and projects of decolonizing subjectivity are what projects supporting Aboriginal education for Self-determination are about. This is the crux of it all, and this is undoubtedly the major learning from this research project.

Until a radical re-thinking occurs in the Ontario public education system, Aboriginal students will continue to experience marginalization which in turn will maintain the statistical realities of early school leaving. The *NYA WEH Program* is about ‘best practices’ but it also enacts limitations and contradictions embedded in settler-colonialism. What is important to remember is that this is a project that is embedded in colonial relations; it is still

within the context of the settler-colonial project of the Canadian nation-state. The sovereign space of room, resources, safety, and wellbeing are all important steps in recognition and it is imperative to respect what is happening in these spaces. A lot is happening in the *NYA WEH Program* and the narratives speak to the many great things that occur at this school. People are Self-determining in ways that make them stronger in their sense of Indigenous identity. And yet, we can also see that this practice cannot exist in a pure space when so many issues remain unresolved in national context.

The *NYA WEH Program* is an Aboriginal education program which is at odds with a public colonial project. Thus, the challenge for the program is to navigate all of these conflicting tensions, in a settler-state where questions of Indigenous sovereignty and rights are still unresolved. Although the *NYA WEH Program* is not all Self-determining, it is moving there as Aboriginal communities engage in a fight over the control of education. This fight is part of a larger political struggle for Self-determination and cultural resurgence. Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache (2000) identify the political nature of Aboriginal education when they write, “Aboriginal education has always been practiced on a terrain of intense political negotiations” (p.251 as cited in Mattson & Caffrey. 2001, p. 16).

In order to construct a curriculum and learning environment which better suits the needs, values, and beliefs of Aboriginal learners, we need to hear and learn from the experiences of young Aboriginal students, as well as those who work in the school environment. As I put forward in this thesis, if we are not talking to and learning from Aboriginal youth and their communities, if we are not linking these narratives to Aboriginal understandings of education, and subsequently developing policy and programming that

supports these understandings, we are not talking about Aboriginal Education for Self-determination. Nor, ultimately, are we talking about Aboriginal student engagement.

Nya:weh

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